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# NIGHT REIGNS

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An MLP Fanfiction by Tursilion



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## Prologue

Dear Diary:

This is SO AWESOME! I GOT MY CUTIE MARK!!

I was in this race against a couple of older boys, and I totally whupped their tails! It was amazing! I passed one so fast he went into a spin and plowed right into the clouds! HAH! I've never gone that fast in my life! It was SUCH A RUSH!! And right there on the home stretch - BAM! Cutie Mark! Oh yeah!

I was going SO FAST, I bet I could *Sonic Rainboom* if I pushed just a little harder. Yeah, it's just a legend, but I'm LEGENDARY. That would be TOTALLY AWESOME!

-Dash

Dear Diary,

I made a new friend today. Well, at least I think she's my friend. I fell down during flight practice again and those bullies were picking on me when she dropped down and told them to stop. They were kind of loud but they ended up having a race for me which, well, I didn't ask them to, but I didn't want to say no. They were so excited that they forgot about me.

When the race started they were so fast that they accidentally knocked me off my cloud. I... um... I forgot I had wings again, and I fell so far. Oh, I was so scared! But I was caught by the most amazing creatures - a whole swarm of butterflies! I've never seen anything so lovely! I ended up in a little forest glen, all the way on the ground, and it was so full of cute and wonderful animals! Oh Diary, it was nothing like Cloudsdale! I spent the whole afternoon there! I'm going back just as soon as I can.

-Fluttershy

Dearest Diary,

My work on the costumes for the *Picnic Paranoia* play at school seems to have been well appreciated, despite my horn's best efforts to disrupt me. Unicorn magic can do the oddest things!

I was working away, trying to figure out how to make the costumes *spectacular*, when my horn suddenly erupted and started leading me outside and down the road. I say 'leading', but really, it was practically dragging me.

They say unicorn magic doesn't happen without a reason, so at first I was excited. But after dragging me halfway across Equestria, my horn deposited me in front of a giant boulder. That's right, Diary. **A great. Big. Rock!** That was supposed to be my *destiny*??

Despite the time lost, I was able to finish the costumes on time. As I noted, everypony liked them, but... they just weren't *magical* enough. I shall have to keep trying, but I will never be a fabulous fashionista if I can't rise above merely "very nice".

-Love, Rarity

Dear Diary,

Today we rotated the rocks on the west field.

-Pinkamena

Dear Diary,

I'M IN! I'm so excited! I was accepted to Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns!

Most of the tests were easy, but I totally choked up when they brought out the last test. They brought out a DRAGON EGG! That was amazing in itself, but they wanted me to hatch it. I don't know anything about hatching eggs, let alone dragons! I really thought that I blew it, but, it turns out that was only a part of my final score. Since I aced everything else, I did well enough.

I'm officially in! I can't believe it! This is going to be so amazing! Their library is ENORMOUS!

-Twilight Sparkle

Dear Diary,

Auntie Orange is working real... I mean... very hard to turn me into a proper city lady. But I miss the farm so very much. I miss Big Macintosh and Granny Smith, and I wonder if I'm cut out to be a city pony at all. City life is so very complicated, and they don't understand very much about life outside the city. I miss having dirt under my hooves,

instead of all this concrete (and don't get me started about how they respond if you're actually DIRTY).

I don't want to complain and it's not my thing to give up easy, so I'll keep trying. Maybe they'll let me visit the farm next month, and that will help the homesickness.

-Applejack

Dear Diary,

I think I may have found her, and not a moment too soon.

I know we have tried many times over the years, and there have been many false starts, but I have been watching a second year student, Sunset Shimmer, for several months now. She shows remarkable talent and skill with magic, and I sense that there is much more under the surface. Even her name gives me hope that she may be the bridge I need between Luna and myself.

I approached her, and she was ecstatic at the thought of working directly with me. Our first class has already gone well - she has a thirst for knowledge that I appreciate greatly. She is a little rough around the edges, but that confidence may serve her well. As she grows up she should fit in better with her peers, and I'll nudge her if I have to.

I no longer have the luxury of time - it's amazing to think that so much time has already elapsed. The signs are starting to appear, and I continue to check every night. I cannot activate the Elements of Harmony. I'm no longer sure that they can be re-activated. But Sunset may have to find the answers that I could not.

I promised you I would find a way, Sister. She is my best hope.

-Celestia

Dear Diary,

I'm now Princess Celestia's *personal* student! If that doesn't show that I'm the most amazing unicorn ever, nothing does! Maybe she's training me to be a princess too! Princess Sunset Shimmer. Yes, I think I like the sound of that. I'm finally getting what I deserve!

-Princess Sunset Shimmer

## Chapter 0 - History

Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony for all the land. To do this, the eldest used her alicorn powers to raise the sun at dawn; the younger brought out the moon to begin the night. Thus, the two sisters maintained balance for their kingdom and their subjects, all the different types of ponies.

But as time went on, the younger sister became resentful. The ponies relished and played in the day her elder sister brought forth, but shunned and slept through her beautiful night. One fateful day, the younger alicorn refused to lower the moon to make way for the dawn. The elder sister tried to reason with her, but the bitterness in the young one's heart had transformed her into a wicked mare of darkness: Nightmare Moon.

She vowed that she would shroud the land in Eternal Night. Reluctantly, the elder sister harnessed the most powerful magic known to ponydom: the Elements of Harmony. Using the magic of the Elements of Harmony she defeated her younger sister and banished her to the moon. The elder sister took on responsibility for both sun and moon, and harmony was maintained in Equestria for generations.

But it could not last. Ten years ago, on the longest night of the thousandth year since her exile, the stars aligned and allowed the Mare in the Moon to return to Equestria. She was furious and went straight to her tasks: she banished her elder sister and denied the sunrise, shrouding the land in the Eternal Night that she promised so long ago.

Nightmare Moon took up the throne in Canterlot, ruling in darkness with absolute decree and force. Those who had grown loyal to her legend took up her cause and formed the new Royal Guard, while those loyal to the Sun were forced underground, under threat of imprisonment.

Over time, Nightmare Moon's fierce involvement in the lives of her citizens waned. While the laws remained strict, new laws were less frequent and far less arbitrary. Dangerous creatures, such as those from EverFree, were fought back and contained in their home ranges. Magical lights lit the crops and fields. The ponies grew brave enough to begin living again, re-opening businesses and even daring to laugh now and then.

A decade of night had passed, but a precarious balance seemed to be approaching.

## Chapter 1 - The First Spark

Everfree forest was not fit for ponies to enter even at the height of Equestria's majesty. The dark, enchanted wood grew slowly, ancient and comfortable with waiting decades for every small gain. It slowly created majestic ruins like the ancient Castle of the Two Sisters while biding its time, barely kept at bay on the outskirts of smaller towns like Ponyville. Within those woods dwelled horrible creatures that loved the darkness, and while they would occasionally venture out of the woods, once driven back in even the most stalwart of pony would not pursue them. Within Everfree, predators both natural and enchanted roamed free and unchecked, and especially in these dark times, ponies who entered the woods often did not come out.

It was unusual then, for a bright white spot to lay in the middle of this dark isolation, but lay there she did. A tear in the thick canopy above smoked gently, letting in the light rain beyond, and a long scar in the otherwise unmolested detritus testified to a hard landing. A light steam rose from wings left spread across the forest floor, and her majestic horned head lay on a pillow of debris as she took deep, slow breaths to regain her strength.

Celestia recounted what she remembered while she waited to catch her breath. She had read the signs correctly; Luna escaped from her prison almost to the minute of her predicted time. Celestia could not know for certain what to expect, but their confrontation was short. Luna had cast a banishment spell of her own, sending Celestia to a magical imprisonment in the Sun - certainly one of the outcomes she had expected. This had not worried Celestia as the Sun was practically an old friend. A magical banishment left her soul intertwined with its core in a nearly timeless state of not-quite-being.

Like Luna's own exile to the moon, she was a part of this body and could work the spell from the inside, as if picking the tumblers of an intricate lock. But Celestia had an agent on the outside as well - her student Sunset Shimmer. Celestia had counted on Sunset to detect the signs and unlock the Elements of Harmony, defeating Nightmare Moon and ending the threat.

Meanwhile, she worked the lock. While Luna had to take advantage of celestial alignment to aid her escape, this banishment spell was brute force and had neither the elegance nor the tenacity of the spell crafted by the Elements of Harmony. Celestia was able to break it on her

own, given only time. The only problem was... how much time had it taken?

Her head lifted, finally, and she looked around herself. It had been difficult to guide herself to the Everfree Forest, but she knew that the ruined old castle would be a familiar place to regroup far away from any prying eyes, who might prematurely reveal her return. She also hoped to find out what had happened with the Elements, which had still been stored there. She could see through the treetops that the darkness persisted well outside of the forest, which could only mean that Sunset Shimmer had failed. If the sun could have risen, she would have returned with it.

Rustling in the bushes around her landing site informed her that she needed to move on. She felt that she could still handle a medium sized predator like a manticore, but her current state was no match for a pack of timberwolves or something larger. She folded her wings deftly, wincing some as she folded them against her body. Pushing herself to her hooves, she stood to her full height, lighting her horn just enough to sense her way.

The rustling drew back a bit at the glow, not quite ready to tangle with a full grown alicorn. But Celestia knew that the creatures of these woods would detect her weakened state soon enough and so she made her way to the ruins of her old home.

Neither hesitant memory nor darkness impeded her progress, and as her hooves struck the stone floor marking the once-great atrium her eyes cast about for any clues. The ancient stone had clearly not been tread in many years. Celestia knew that the beasts of Everfree shunned the ancient castle, for the magic that once resided here still echoed, but even the most recent hoofprints were buried under years of dirt and debris.

She followed the barely visible trail in deeper, towards where the Great Hall once stood. Here the Elements had been stored after they stopped working. The hoofprints in the dirt approached the ancient podium upon which the Elements were once displayed and then grew muddled, as though circling and doubling back upon themselves. Of the Elements themselves, Celestia could see no trace.

Sighing softly, she ventured deeper into the ruins towards where some of the ancient rooms still stood. She could stay there while she evaluated the situation, learned what had happened in her absence, and formulated a new plan. But first she needed to take stock of herself.

She turned down one derelict hallway, then another, deeper into the ruins until surrounded by several layers of ancient stone. Her

memories guided her flawlessly as she remembered these halls - running through them in play, pacing through them in times of political crisis, storming through them when some self-important administrator needed to be reminded where his authority ended. But only protected in these deepened halls did she finally allow her horn to brighten enough to actually look around.

She had made her way to one of the ancient libraries, where tomes of knowledge rotted on the shelves. She allowed herself enough magic to light just one of the lamps lining the pillars of the room and drew forth a dusty cushion. Settling herself down, her eyes gently closed and she took stock of her own health.

Carefully, she opened her wings, wincing once again as her left wing complained particularly bitterly. Gritting her teeth, she reached out with her magic and gently felt the wing structures, finally confirming her suspicions: she'd broken it crashing through the trees. It would need to heal before she could fly again - not that it was safe to fly until she understood the situation better.

Her magic reached out further and finally located both a suitable tapestry and a wooden chair. She tore the tapestry into strips, and broke the chair into splints, carefully setting and securing the wing against movement. A slight flash of additional magic secured the splint into place, making it far less makeshift. It left her wing awkwardly pointing up and back, but she was convinced it would heal well enough.

Other than the broken wing, she had gotten off easily, only scrapes and cuts. Satisfied, she rose again, stepping back into the hallway. Her hooves echoed in the stillness as she made her way further in, turning left just a few passages along.

The room she entered was once a small indoor garden, fed with pure water from a deep, clear spring well. Now, however, she could barely enter the room before she was blocked by the thick vegetation. Her horn lit again as she began to cut through it, slowly slicing back and forth, slowly making her way to the center of the room.

As she grew nearer to it, she realized that the ceiling had fallen in here - crumbled rock and stone lay in a jumbled heap overtop of where she believed that the well once laid. With a small cry of frustration, she began to shift the boulders aside, one by one, moving them only as far as she had to. At last she revealed a small, circular hole, and stilled her magic. She lowered her head and panted softly.

Her magic was the one thing that she was trying not to take stock of, but this seemingly simple exertion made it impossible for her to

ignore. She knew that she was greatly depleted. Breaking Luna's spell and returning to Equestria, without the direct path of a dawn and entirely on her own, had been more difficult than she cared to admit. She dropped her head, unsurprised as the long strands of her pink mane - devoid of the large magic reserves she once wielded - draped across her face and hung towards the floor. She could use simple magic, but it would take months to regain her original level of power. Without it she was no match for Nightmare Moon.

Thirst finally ended her self-meditation, and she looked down into the hole, lighting her horn gently again. Fate smiled upon her, as she noticed the reflection of her light glinting back from water near the base. The old wooden bucket was nowhere to be found, but she simply scooped up some of the water in a small bubble of magic and lifted it up to the top. She gave it a cautious sniff and then, satisfied that it was still fresh, drank deeply of it.

Her eyes closed in absolute pleasure as the cool liquid began to hydrate her exhausted form. She imagined it spreading through her body, filling every artery with refreshment, and she was convinced as she finished the bubble that she already stood stronger. A second, then a third bubble followed until she forced herself to stop, not wanting to overdo it.

Still, she brought up one more bubble of water, this time taking another strip of the tapestry, and using it as a wash cloth. She soaked it in the water and began to clean her wounds, working slowly and deliberately. Again, she noted that she was not very injured save for her wing, and only one larger cut required additional magic to seal it. When at last she was done, she returned to the library.

Settling down again, her thoughts turned to her student, Sunset Shimmer. What had happened to her? Celestia felt that the hoofprints she saw near the podium where the Elements were once stored might have belonged to Sunset, if her student had been able to follow the clues. But it must have been years ago, and why were her hoofprints alone? Furthermore, where were the elements now?

Celestia mused that Sunset may have determined that the Elements were important and taken them with her to activate them. But then she frowned - it clearly hadn't worked. Did Sunset successfully activate the Elements? Did Nightmare Moon stand against them this time? Or had Celestia's own actions a thousand years ago truly drained them of their magic, leaving everypony defenseless? She couldn't say.

And Luna... her own sister turned monstrous Nightmare Moon. Did she in fact rule? Was this nighttime still hers? More importantly... was she still angry? Or did she get her wish and keep the night because the

ponies finally loved and appreciated it? Would Celestia have nothing to fix after all?

She snorted, shaking her head. That last thought was clearly fantasy. But, for just a moment, she let herself hold onto it. With that moment's pause, fatigue caught up with her rapidly running mind and sleep overtook her; dreams following closely behind. A small smile creased her muzzle as she dreamt of Luna's beloved night.

## Chapter 2 - The Light of the New Moon

Canterlot Castle was constructed from gleaming white marble as the centerpiece of Canterlot hundreds of years ago. It was shining and unmistakable whether under sunlight or moonlight, and the magnificent edifice was built prominently on the side of a large mountain which made it visible even from miles away. This monument earned the capital city the nickname of "The White City", and before night fell, ponies would travel from all over Equestria to gaze upon it.

Even under eternal night, the castle had a glow all its own, and Nightmare Moon ensured that staff were kept busy keeping it that way. To her, it proved that the light of the moon was every bit as beautiful and awe-inspiring as a sunrise, and as such it was one of the few things that she took personal interest in over the years.

Nightmare Moon herself was a striking black alicorn. Her mane and tail flowed deep blue with the currents of a strong magic which reflected the night sky even deep in the corridors. She wore an obsidian crown and a deep blue crest across her chest, bearing the same light turquoise crescent moon as her cutie mark. She also wore ornate, deep blue steel shoes, with guards reaching nearly to her knees. It resembled the armor that she had worn upon her return from the moon, save that she no longer wore her helmet.

The lack of a sunrise had failed to hold back bureaucracy for long and her rule over Equestria had fallen into a routine rather quickly. Morning was marked by the clock rather than the sky, but otherwise, things would still be done on a schedule. This morning, by the clock, she strode quickly through the halls. Her hooves clapped loudly against the smooth stone floors and she moved without hesitation even in the darkest shadows of the corridors where moonlight failed to reach.

At her side was an unusually large grey wolf who stood as tall as her shoulders. He kept easy pace with her as he related the day's news. Ulfrid was the sole remaining administrative staff - the rest having fled in Nightmare Moon's early months out of fear for her angry tirades and threats. He was also the only one who seemed to be able to carry out her orders, as far as she could tell.

"... There is a report that the Griffin Kingdom has scientists working on an artificial sun."

Nightmare Moon snorted. "Let them work. We saw how well that turned out last time."

The wolf nodded, "Yes, your Highness. The settler ponies on the western frontier have reported an increase in hostilities from the local buffalo. That area is at risk of destabilizing."

"Send a dozen guards. That should stop them from complaining."

"Of course, Highness. Ah, and we have a report from Ponyville that a meteor struck the Everfree Forest last night."

"Troublesome place," Nightmare Moon grumbled. "Remind me to send an entire meteor storm to flatten it."

Ulfrid smiled and nodded again. "Yes, your Majesty."

The pair stopped at a large ornate door and the wolf bowed low. "Your court awaits," he noted.

"I don't know why we bother with this every month," grumbled Nightmare Moon. "Hardly anypony shows up, and when they do, it is nothing but petty complaints and meaningless bickering that I am asked to deal with."

The wolf remained in his bow, his face towards the floor. "It is how your citizens remember that you are here for them, and how you show them that you care about their concerns, my Liege."

Nightmare Moon rolled her eyes and then lit her horn to open the door and enter the throne room. Only after she passed did Ulfrid rise and follow her. The throne room was tall and long, adorned with dark purple banners and a plush red carpet leading from the far door to the base of the throne. The throne itself stood on an elevated platform and was carved from an enormous black gemstone which was evidently kept extremely well-polished. Nightmare Moon made her way onto the dais and finally settled down onto the large, plush cushion that completed her throne. Ulfrid took his spot to the side of the long red carpet, one step lower, and then nodded to the guard at the far end of the room.

"But one petitioner this morning, my Liege," he told Nightmare Moon as the doors were swung inward. She peered at him and briefly wondered how he always knew this. Leaving that thought be for the moment, she shook her head.

"Pointless, as I said," she muttered. "It will be some pointless demand that I change something, like when the bankers come asking me to approve a change of interest rates. Hardly work for a Queen!"

Ulfrid smiled softly and nodded towards the carpet, where an earth pony was making her way slowly towards the throne. She was light blue with neatly woven yellow pigtails and she was wearing a simple and faded pink dress that was nonetheless immaculately cleaned and pressed.

She looked nervously left and right as she approached, looking anywhere but directly at Nightmare Moon. Nightmare Moon waited quietly as this was also a part of the ritual that she had become used to. Some days she was flattered by the fear, some days she was bored by it. Today it irritated her.

Finally the little pony reached the base of the dais and dropped into an awkward bow with her face touching the carpet. "I... m... my... my name is Golden Mill. I... I run a... a wheat farm outside Fillydelphia...?"

Nightmare Moon rolled her eyes again; she already knew exactly where this was going. She fixed Golden Mill with a stern look. "What do you want?"

Golden Mill shuddered, even though she didn't look up. "I... I... we... um... we expanded our fields. I... I know light is rationed, but... to make the wheat grow, we... we need twelve more lumens. Please?" She chanced a look up, and shrank back at the glare. "Um... ten might do?" she squeaked.

Nightmare Moon stood up and flapped her wings once in annoyance. "Perhaps ten *weeks* in the dungeons will give you opportunity to consider wasting my time?" she growled. "Ulfrid! See to it that this pony gets what she deserves!" She cast a final glare at Golden Mill, then strode back to the ornate doors and stormed through them, out of sight.

As the doors closed the wolf came forward. He sat on the bottom step and faced the little pony. "Twelve lumens it shall be," he said quietly. "I shall ensure that you have your quota before you leave the castle today."

Golden Mill's eyes widened as she looked up at the wolf, her slowly forming tears stopped by pure surprise. "But... but! N... Nightmare Moon said...?"

Ulfrid nodded his head once. "I obey her Highness' order without question. Come with me, and we will get you set for your return journey to Fillydelphia."

-----

Nightmare Moon lay quietly on the largest balcony of the castle. It was attached to the largest of the royal bedchambers, and it was positioned such that it could look out over much of Equestria. It was from here that Celestia had often performed her duties with the sun and moon. It was also here that Nightmare Moon had confronted her and banished her to the sun.

For the moment, Nightmare Moon was amusing herself by racing meteors in the night sky. She guided them as they left flaming streaks through the atmosphere, curving their paths and tracing intricate patterns until they turned to ash, nothing left to burn.

Ulfrid entered, silently approaching and sitting beside her. Nightmare Moon mused that she would never detect him were it not for her magic - he was unnaturally quiet and rarely made a sound that he did not mean to make. But she did detect him and when the current race ended, he spoke.

"So will you destroy the Everfree Forest now, my Liege?" he inquired with just the hint of a tease in his voice. "You asked that I remind you."

Nightmare Moon smiled at the teasing and wondered whether she would tolerate it from anyone else. "Too much trouble to gather enough meteors," she replied as she smirked a little. "I fear that I have burned up too many already, at least for now."

They sat quietly, each with a small smile on their face, until Nightmare Moon spoke again. "What of that farmer pony? Did you deal with her?"

Ulfrid nodded. "Aye, Highness. She shall not soon trouble you again."

Nightmare Moon gave a satisfied grunt and nodded. "There are so many little things to worry about. It hardly seems worth it some days." She looked up to the moon and her voice became more gentle. "But have I not given them everything they need? Have I not given them all that they want?"

The wolf shifted a moment, and then nodded, speaking clearly but carefully. "All but the sun, my Liege."

Nightmare Moon frowned, and shook her head. "You know as well as I do that is impossible. The instant that the sun crossed the horizon, Celestia would return and destroy me. But I have compromised. I have given them their light, I have given them protection, and I have given them their freedom. In return, I have this... this... I do not know. Monotony is not quite the correct word, but it is close. It leaves me uneasy."

Ulfrid smiled reassuringly to her. "It is not such a bad thing. Monotony means that we are at peace, and that nopony is starving or in danger. It is good that all is calm."

Nightmare Moon frowned, and let her gaze drift off towards the horizon. "Unless it is the calm before the storm."

## Chapter 3 – Gathering Condensation

Captain Sterling Honor was a magnificent stallion to behold. His pure white coat was not overbearing to look upon, but rather glowed with an inner strength of both body and horn. A light chainmail covered his torso, with a solid dark breastplate adorned with the crescent moon symbol of his land. This was a unicorn as comfortable on the battlefield as standing next to Her Majesty in the throne room as standing before a group of young recruits ready to begin training – all of which he had done many times. Immaculately groomed, intensely experienced, and fiercely loyal, he was the sort of unicorn one might expect to find on a coat of arms.

Captain Sterling was the absolute leader of Nightmare Moon's Royal Guard, responsible for the defense and law enforcement of much of Equestria. He was receiving a report by a sand-colored earth pony in similar armor, though it was somewhat simpler than his own. At the moment, Sterling Honor was wearing a slight frown, a warning to the Sergeant that he did not like the direction that this report was going.

"Sergeant, tell me again why the shop keeper in question now sits in the dungeon, more the worse for wear?"

"As I reported, sir: he was overheard complaining about the darkness and wishing for the sun to rise again."

Sterling raised a hoof to his own forehead and closed his eyes, counting silently to three before he responded. "And so, the guards who overheard this arrested him, and *then* assaulted him for resisting arrest. Is that correct?"

The sergeant shifted uncomfortably, then returned to attention and nodded. "Um... undeniably, sir. Yes."

Sterling spoke very deliberately, pausing frequently to maintain his composure. Inside, he was seething. "Sergeant Impulse, how many times must I remind you... that we do not *do* that anymore? The citizens are free to make comments, so long as they are not inciting unrest."

Sergeant Impulse frowned noticeably. "So says that *wolf*," he grumbled.

At that comment Sterling Honor's face lost the battle to maintain composure and grew very nasty indeed. He leaned in very close to Sergeant Impulse and spoke in a very low tone. "That *wolf*," he repeated, using the same tone, "is the right hoof of our Queen, and if he instructed

me to remove your *head*, I would do so without hesitation. Now, you will release that shop keeper and personally see to it that he is not disturbed until safely back to his home. Then you will find a way to perform your duties without coming into my sight for the next week, whilst simultaneously preventing a repeat of this incident. Do I make myself clear?"

Sergeant Impulse had far less experience with maintaining composure, and his expression fell rather quickly. "Y... Yes Sir!"

"Then you are *dismissed*."

As the sergeant hurriedly exited the office, Captain Sterling went around to the back of his desk and sat down heavily. His eyes lifted until they rested on a royal painting of Nightmare Moon which hung proudly on the wall.

*"He's right, though," thought the Captain. "Everything has become so different since the wolf stepped into the picture. It was he who instructed the easing of the laws, permitted the entrance of light into homes... even allowed ponies to speak badly of Her Majesty herself. It makes our job easier as enforcers of the law, but what are we doing?"*

His eyes sought the eyes in the painting, and he looked into them as if the answers would lie there. *"Is this truly **your** will, Ma'am? Or does he rule in your stead when your back is turned? You told me to trust him and I will follow your orders, but I have doubts. Worse, my legion has doubts, and they joined for the ideal of your eternal night. I am not so sure they are loyal to any variation of the legend, even if it **is** from you directly."*

He stared into the dragon-like eyes of Nightmare Moon's image for a few minutes longer, just in case Her Majesty might somehow wish to ease the questions in his mind. But when it did not happen he looked back down to his desk. He lit his horn to levitate a planner which was atop his inbox closer, so that he could read it. He scanned the list once, committing it to memory, and then set it aside. Continuing fluidly, he then summoned a quill and scroll from a nearby cabinet and began to write his weekly report. He estimated that he had about an hour to prepare it before presenting it later that afternoon. Before that, he still needed to debrief the scouts who had returned from the Frozen North. He had heard that they had found something very interesting and that would certainly need to be a part of the report.

Fifty-nine minutes later, he tucked the quill back into its holder, sealed the ink bottle, and rolled up the spare scroll paper. The spare paper went back into the cabinet while the scroll he had been writing on went into the small pocket at the rear of his armor. As he stood, he summoned

his helmet from across the room, settling it gently onto his head. He paused a moment before the full-length mirror at the side of the room - not out of vanity but rather because it was his duty to always be properly presentable - and deftly adjusted his mane. Then he stepped out of his office to debrief the scout.

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The pegasus pony reporting on the scouting mission was young, excited, and almost perfectly sky-blue. Captain Sterling briefly reflected that he must have had near perfect overhead camouflage during day missions - back when there was a day. His name was Stratosphere, and he specialized in high altitude reconnaissance.

"So, to summarize, it's really cold up north, sir. The winds are wicked sharp and ponies don't leave their homes much. We couldn't see that the neighboring lands have been sneaking in."

Captain Sterling nodded, prompting him. "Then you found something unusual?"

"Yeah, dude! I... I mean sir! I mean yes, sir! We saw this one pony hauling a big old wagon across the ice, so of course we flew down to interrogate her. She was pretty rude, saying we had no right to stop her and stuff, and she said she was headed for Las Pegasus! From the North! Can you imagine that, man? I mean, sir?"

The Captain nodded once. "And then what happened?"

"Well, d... sir! She was giving us a lot of attitude, so we searched her wagon. Most of it was crappy wooden props and stuff for some kind of kid's show, but we also found explosives and a magical artifact! We had to confiscate all that, of course, and then she got REALLY mad and tried to get it back. So we had to arrest her."

"She's here now?"

"Yeah, dude... sir! She's in the dungeons."

"What kind of explosives did you find?"

The scout hesitated. "Don't you want to hear about the magical artifact?"

"After. Tell me about the explosives."

"Yes, sir." He sounded disappointed. "It... it wasn't anything much. A bunch of fireworks and stuff."

Captain Sterling chuckled. "Well, that's unusual, but I don't think we'll keep her in custody for that."

"Can I tell you about the magical artifact now... sir?"

The Captain nodded. "Of course, proceed."

Stratosphere's face lit up again. "This is totally radical, du... sir! I have it right here for you!" He opened up his saddlebag and fished out a small box. He lifted the top off it, and presented it to Sterling with his wings, shaking with excitement. "Check! It! Out!"

Captain Sterling looked into the box. The artifact in question was an ornately crafted silver bust of a winged unicorn with its head turned to the side - an alicorn. Both its eye and embedded into its chest were gemstones of extremely high quality. A strap suggested that it was meant to be worn around the neck.

"Dude!" crowed Stratosphere, forgetting to correct himself this time. "I think it's the Alicorn Amulet!"

Sterling took the box in his magic and then lifted the amulet from within it. He rotated it in the air before himself and studied it carefully. The gemstones seemed to glow from within, pulsing as he studied them. "I'm not familiar with it," he admitted. "What does it do?"

Stratosphere grinned. "It's only the most powerful magical enhancement in existence, d... sir! I read all about magical amulets when I was a colt; I really thought someday I could become a unicorn with enough work. Then I discovered how awesome altitude is, and dude, I never looked back. But the second I saw this bad boy, man, it all came back to me! You wear this, and you're the most powerful unicorn alive!"

Sterling rotated the amulet one more time, then put it back in the box. He replaced the lid and stowed it into his own saddlebag. "In that case you are correct; the law dictates that we must confiscate this. You can return the rest of the prisoner's effects and let her go with a warning." He chuckled. "Tell her to be grateful - she got a free ride halfway to her destination."

"Aw man! Aren't you even going to try it out?" Stratosphere seemed genuinely disappointed.

Sterling fixed him with a stern look. "It's not a toy and we don't own the things we confiscate. I will present this to Nightmare Moon and she will decide what will be done with it. Thank you, Scout, you are dismissed."

The pegasus looked disappointed for only a moment longer, then abruptly brightened. "Well, hey, better here than out there, right sir? Catch you later!" Stratosphere launched himself straight up in a cloud of dust, and Captain Sterling set off back to his office. He wasn't certain why

just yet, but for the moment he decided not to include the amulet in his report.

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Having safely stored the artifact in his office, Captain Sterling started towards the throne room to present his weekly report to Nightmare Moon, or more commonly of late, her wolf steward. He considered this as he walked until his attention was caught by the familiar shouts of drill commands to the uninitiated on the parade square.

He stopped and turned to observe the new recruits. An unfamiliar light-colored pony was shouting commands to quick march, left turn, and halt to a group of awkward and nervous looking ponies of all colors. Each time they failed to move quickly enough, or turned the wrong way, he would shout quite a few additional words that were not in the training manuals. The instructor pony was even balder than the recruits, who were wearing the mandatory short-cropped manes.

Captain Sterling squinted at the pony, trying to place him. He knew every non-commissioned officer under his command, so he was confused as to why he didn't recognize this one.

All at once it dawned on him. It was Sergeant Impulse out there. In response to the command to find a way to stay out of sight, the sergeant must have shaved off his mane, dramatically changing his appearance. It had only been a couple of hours; the sergeant was certainly living up to his name. Captain Sterling laughed and turned to continue on his way.

"Well done, Sergeant. Well done."

## Chapter 4 - Red at Night

Sunset Shimmer was a brilliant amber unicorn with a vivid crimson and yellow striped mane whose cutie mark depicted a crimson and yellow sun. It represented her talent for magic and thirst for all knowledge related to it. But it had been ten years now since she had been able to learn any new spells; ten years since she had failed to stop eternal night from falling.

"Happy birthday to me-eee," she sang quietly to herself, although there was little joy in her voice. She blew out the lone candle burning atop a small cupcake on the table before her and plunged her tiny room once more into darkness. Her horn was allowed only a faint glow of light, even less than the candle had given off.

Once her eyes adjusted, she started to take tiny bites from the cupcake - the lone yearly treat she allowed herself since the bakeries had again started functioning openly. She always tried to keep this moment from being unhappy, but her mind always seemed to roll back to what had happened all the same.

She had been in Ponyville overseeing the preparations for the Summer Sun Celebration. Why Ponyville was still a mystery to her, it was just a tiny little village on the edge of the Everfree Forest. But she was there all the same - checking on decorations and snacks and so many menial little things. She had seen the signs - Nightmare Moon was coming - but Celestia had sent her there anyway.

At the dramatic moment of reveal, Nightmare Moon had appeared in place of Princess Celestia, cackling and proclaiming that *the night will last forever*. She had swatted away the royal guards as if they were flies and Sunset's own attack, powerful though it was, was simply reflected back at her. It was only by the smallest of margins that she had avoided being obliterated by her own spell - a spell that she had studied for years! She had had no choice but to run.

She went underground, fearful of being recognized. She didn't know if all of Nightmare Moon's new 'Royal' Guard were looking for her, but she occasionally saw somepony that she recognized wearing the new dark blue armor. She was fairly certain that if they recognized her, they would certainly call her out. She had heard of too many ponies imprisoned for the crime of being "sun lovers" - what crime would they invent for Princess Celestia's own star pupil? She supposed that her attack on Nightmare Moon would have been enough in any event.

Then she had begun to research. Without access to Canterlot's grand libraries, she had to rely on lone books scattered across Equestria. She sought out fragments of legend and forgotten books in the corners of dusty libraries. Little of it was complete and less was clear - and she always had to be careful of who she spoke to and how long she stayed in one place.

Eventually she pieced the legends together. Nightmare Moon had originally been banished by the Elements of Harmony - the only magic powerful enough to stop her. Very little was recorded about the Elements, but the clues led her to an ancient castle deep in the Everfree Forest. She went there, and she did find them, but she had no idea what to do next. She took them away and studied them in secret for nearly a year. Eventually, however, she could find no trace of magic within them and abandoned them.

Life began to recover in Equestria in the meantime and as ponies began to live more openly, she finally tired of running. She had found a basement room in Vanhoover where she could stay largely out of sight. This far from the capital, she could keep a low profile and no pony need know who she was. She performed odd magical jobs and traded items from under a cloak, reading and re-reading the few books she had managed to collect and keep for herself. She even rotated the shops she frequented to prevent becoming too familiar - all except for the one bakery where she allowed herself one birthday treat a year. This one treat was supposed to be a respite from her self-pity, but it never seemed to work.

"It wasn't really my fault!" she insisted to the room in general.

But the darkness disagreed with her.

"Celestia only had to tell me what she knew," she cried out, defending herself from the invisible accusers all around. "I would have known what to study. She didn't trust me!"

*Or perhaps you didn't trust her.*

"But she *KNEW*! She could have made me a Princess! We could have faced Nightmare Moon together!"

*Or you could have become Nightmare Moon yourself.*

Sunset dropped her head and spoke no further, her cupcake sitting half-eaten on her plate. Her shoulders began to shake gently, and occasionally a sniffle came up from under her hanging mane. The shadows were right - all she had wanted was the power. She would have been as likely to abuse the power as to use it wisely.

Five minutes, ten, twenty, she didn't know how much time had passed and she didn't much care. Her head came up slowly and she used the back of her hoof to wipe the tears from her cheeks. Pushing back from the table, she left the cupcake unfinished. All she wanted to do now was go to bed.

A loud buzz and a flash of light caused her to pause in mid-step. She turned her head towards the heavy blinds covering her sole window out to the city streets. *"What kind of fool would be doing street construction at this hour?"* she wondered. *"That is, whatever hour it is."*

Again the buzz sounded, and the flash of light. She could clearly see the light reflected from the blinds - it was inside her room! Her eyes traced the flash back to the apparent source and she walked towards it, approaching her bookshelf carefully.

Again the buzz, and again the flash, and her jaw dropped. Hesitantly, she reached out with her magic, drawing a book from its spot and levitating it halfway between the shelf and herself. She turned it in the air so that she could see the cover. It was an old book and the cover was inscribed with a copy of her cutie mark. As she stared at it, holding it in her magic, it buzzed and flashed again.

"That's impossible..." she whispered. "It must be a trick...?"

Her eyes were wide as she stared at the book, reflecting the flash of light as the book signaled again. This was her training journal - a magical book connected to a similar book in Princess Celestia's library. Write in one book and it appears in the other. If Nightmare Moon had found it, maybe this was a trick. Maybe opening the book would trace the guards to her.

*What if it's not? Open it.*

Sunset looked around again. It was rare for the shadows to encourage her. But they were often very right.

"Yes. I have to take that chance."

Carefully, she set the book on the floor. Then she dared to light her horn further and cast a shield around the book. She didn't know if it would help, but she hoped that it would confuse any tracing spell that might be tied to it. She bit her lower lip carefully, looking around at the shadows for confirmation, and then opened the cover. As a dim glow on the page began to illuminate new writing, she leaned forward to read the words.

*My dear Sunset Shimmer,*

*I was overjoyed to receive your last update - you are learning so much so quickly.*

*As you know, next week is the Summer Sun Celebration. I will be performing it this year in Ponyville, which is of course one of the closest small towns to Canterlot. I will need you to go there to assist me with preparations. Do be wary of the ruins in EverFree Forest - the woods are not safe.*

*I know that with your help, we will be ready to greet another wonderful sunrise!*

*Yours Truly,*

*Princess Celestia*

The book's glow faded, and once Sunset sensed that the magic was finished she let down her shield. She approached the book cautiously, as if expecting it to strike like a snake, but it did not move. Again her eyes reviewed the message. This message could have been from ten years ago, when she was sent to Ponyville, but in that case why would the book trigger now? Besides that, she had received her orders from Celestia in person; her teacher had not used the book to send instructions in the past.

It was almost a meaningless message... a throwaway from a decade ago - but her eyes kept coming back to one sentence.

*I will need you to go there to assist me with preparations.*

She read it again. It nagged at her.

*...assist me...*

Sunset had gone to Ponyville to oversee preparations, not to assist Celestia. It was one of the things that she had considered so demeaning about the task. The Princess herself had not been expected to arrive until just before the performance.

Her eyes shifted downwards and another passage struck a chord.

*I know that with your help, we will be ready to greet another wonderful sunrise!*

Celestia had hated the Summer Sun Celebration. Sunset had never understood why and Princess Celestia had always dismissed any questions about her mood as being due to nerves. But Sunset knew this all the same and Celestia had rarely pretended otherwise in private.

*...to greet another wonderful sunrise!*

A scenario started to form in Sunset Shimmer's mind. Sunset herself had treated the book with caution as she didn't know who was on

the other end. What would be the safest thing for someone on the other end to write, if they had the same doubts?

*A message from the past, so easily dismissed as a glitch in an old spell!*

Her eyes scanned the message rapidly, her breathing increasing as she allowed herself a faint glimmer of hope. Her eyes caught on another sentence.

*Do be wary of the ruins in EverFree Forest - the woods are not safe.*

That had to be it! On the surface, a typical warning that anypony would give a first-time visitor to Dodge City or Ponyville, but there was no need to tell a studied pony like Sunset Shimmer. Or to mention...

*...the ruins...*

The ruins were buried so deeply that few ponies even knew where they were, let alone would anypony be foolish enough to think that they could stumble through to them. But Sunset knew where they were and how to get there - it was where she had found the Elements of Harmony. It *had* to be a clue.

But she was uncertain about what to do first. She considered her options carefully. If it was a real message, she thought that she should write back that she retrieved it, maybe even that she understood it. But if it was a trap... writing back would tell Nightmare Moon - or whoever it was - that she took the bait. She knew that she was going to follow the clues, but it would be unwise to tell them.

After a moment's further thought, she closed the book. She fetched her saddlebag and stored the book there rather than back on the bookshelf. The train to Ponyville was an overnight trip, by the clock. She would send a carefully worded reply, but only after she was much closer. Then she'd have surprise on her side if it was a trap.

She found herself humming as she began to pack. It was nice that somepony had remembered her birthday after all.

## Chapter 5 - Glowing Embers

This corner of the ancient library had undergone some changes since Celestia had arrived. The rotting tables and chairs had been cleaned out, except for the large table that she rose from. Along either side of the room, stacks of relevant books had been picked out, and a large collection of moldy scrolls had been retrieved and stacked against the shelves. Celestia approached this stack and sent her golden magical aura towards it. The scrolls lifted into the air and began reordering themselves before her, shifting back to front and top to bottom until at last she smiled and drew one closer. The others settled quietly back onto the floor and their glow faded.

She turned to the other side of the room, where she had mounted an ancient notice board, and unfolded the scroll. The unfolding revealed a grand, if ancient, map of Equestria. Her horn sparked tiny flashes of magic at its corners as she pinned it flat to the board. Then she let the glow fade as she studied the map.

Even to her knowledge this map was old, but it was sufficient. It was old enough that the ruins she now occupied still stood as a small but magnificent castle at the edge of a much more open wood. She let her eyes run over the map, noting the many towns and cities that did not even exist yet, and she sighed softly. Times had been difficult when this map was drawn, too, as she and Luna had not long before defeated Discord. The lands had still been in turmoil from the long rule of the Spirit of Chaos, but there was so much hope and Luna had been so excited. Celestia supposed that she had been excited too, but she had worked hard to appear more regal and more level-headed. She had taken her new responsibilities very seriously.

*Was that my first mistake?*

Celestia shook her head. She had no time for doubts right now. The spell that she needed to cast had to be done very carefully with her limited magic reserve, and precision was important. Her horn lit gently, and she reached out to the map. As if stitching fabric, she began to weave faintly glowing threads of magic between the map and the forest around the castle, working slowly and deliberately. She couldn't afford a magic surge that might give away her position and she couldn't afford to waste power, so she focused her mind and wove a single thread at a time.

At last she was satisfied and her horn's glow faded again, as did the magical threads. She leaned in closer to the map, studying it carefully.

After a moment, a single dot of ink moved just a hair. Then another did, on the other side of the castle. When she saw a third movement she allowed herself a smile. The spell was working as she'd intended: a perimeter was established around the castle that would show her if anypony was moving nearby. The threads of magic were largely passive - responding to the magic of the creature moving and feeding it back to the map. A larger magical presence would create a larger mark on the map, but the drain on Celestia's own magic would be minimal. It was nearly undetectable if you didn't know to look for it.

Her next action had been to take advantage of a little known spell linking this library to Canterlot. When she had finally abandoned the structure and settled in Canterlot, she and her advisors had left many of the books here. Rather than be cut off from the knowledge and history, a spell linked the two libraries which allowed books from one to be transferred to the other - if a pony knew what book she needed.

Although the spell was weakened over time, it was still functional. The main problem Celestia had was that she did not know what books would give her insight. A few random guesses had yielded some account-keeping books, but little else that informed her about the last few years. She was amused to find that they were somewhat unsurprising - apparently the Canterlot bureaucrats were not at all slowed by eternal night.

She had also gained a rough idea how long it had been from the meticulous record keeping of the accounting ponies. She closed the latest book with a sigh. Ten years. Had it really been ten years of night? How could the time have passed so quickly? What had happened to the land in all that time? What had happened to Sunset Shimmer?

That was one answer she could at least try to get. Lighting her horn again, she summoned one more book, a dusty old notebook with her own cutie mark inscribed on her cover. Her magic opened the book and flipped through to reveal a blank page. She summoned a quill and thought for a few minutes, and then began to write.

It took her only a few moments and then Celestia laid the quill down on the table. The magic of her horn faded as the words on the page likewise faded from a golden glow to normal looking black ink. She sighed softly and read the message yet again. She knew that she was taking a large risk even attempting this.

"Oh, Celestia," she whispered to herself. "Could you have been ANY more obvious?" She wondered if even a low ranking officer in Nightmare Moon's court would have fallen for her attempt to write it as if from the past. Her head turned towards the ceiling, beyond which she

knew the night sky sparkled brilliantly. "At least Luna would not know much about the Summer Sun Celebration. Maybe she would be too busy to do more than dismiss it."

*But what if Sunset dismisses it as old magic herself?*

Celestia shook her head at the thought. "Sunset Shimmer is brilliant," she reassured herself. "She will know it means something more and read between the lines. Besides, didn't I just tell myself it was too obvious?" She closed the book gently, watching it for a few more minutes in case it responded. Sunset Shimmer was her best chance to find out the state of the world beyond the forest, but Celestia couldn't be certain she would arrive. She also couldn't just wait for things to solve themselves - that was in part why she was in this situation. After a moment longer, she stood up and made her way across the room.

Her destination was the one part of this ancient castle that she was not very familiar with – the catacombs beneath it. Luna had been responsible for them, taking great delight in creating mysterious secret doors and creepy passageways. Celestia had largely left them to her, playfully dismissing her sister as 'weird'.

*Was that my first mistake?*

She knew there were many entrances, including trap doors and secret slides, but she also knew that there was a closer and safer way down. She walked down the long library and turned into a small alcove, stopping before the narrow bookcase at the end. Activating her magic, she found the hidden switch and pulled, causing the ancient hidden doorway to swing open with a loud groan. Soon it revealed a dark stone staircase, leading down into the dark.

Celestia brightened her horn and began to carefully make her way down the stairs. The staircase was well-preserved, but littered with dirt and stone debris that sometimes made footing treacherous. Still she moved steadily, her expression set. She may have been Princess of the Sun but she held no fear of the dark. She likewise knew that the dangerous creatures of Everfree would not have chosen to reside down here – for the same reason as they avoided above. The magic that still echoed in these walls disturbed them and kept them at bay. But she was vulnerable to falling and decay made the stone itself dangerous.

She reached the bottom without incident and started down the mossy stone corridor. Her horn lit even brighter as she cast out and tried to sense residual magic, hoping for a sense of her sister. But there was nothing, at least here. Time had faded the ancient magic to echoes without distinction, and she resigned herself to exploring.

*"I should have done this much sooner," she thought to herself. "It was so easy to let myself be distracted... so easy to believe that everything would just be okay when she returned. I was foolish and all Equestria paid for it."*

Celestia was not naive. She had figured out most of it easily enough – Luna had all but spelled it out for her when she first appeared as Nightmare Moon. Luna felt neglected by the ponies of Equestria and she was jealous of Celestia's popularity. But that was the big picture... Celestia was now hoping to fill in the finer details – if it was still possible to do so.

She started down the hallway, looking around. She remembered this part of the corridor - Luna had brought her this way to show her the latest trick room when the castle was still new. Turning a corner, you'd suddenly find yourself in a square room with no exits – not even in the direction that you came from. Illusionary walls hid the passage in and out and Luna had giggled in her playful manner when she described how confused a lost pony might be in there.

No sign of that ancient spell remained today, and as Celestia turned the corner she could clearly see the corridor continue through the tiny room. To her knowledge, nopony besides herself and perhaps a few unfortunate members of the staff had ever experienced Luna's playful traps. There was not even any reason for visitors to come down here, but this hadn't stopped Luna from creating. Celestia smiled again as she remembered Luna's excitement while describing new rooms... descriptions that Celestia could not remember details of. Even while nodding, she had more or less tuned them out as she worked.

*Another mistake.*

After this room she was a little less certain of her direction, but there hadn't been any branches to worry about yet. She continued down the corridor, noting that another set of Luna's fake hoof torch holders lined this wall. She laughed softly... she had written in her diary about how weird Luna was after seeing these for the first time, but it had all seemed harmless enough. That was in the early days, when Luna still laughed, too.

*When did she stop laughing? Did I even notice?*

She reached a junction and looked left and right along the dark passages. She could just see something at the end of the left junction, and brightened her horn further to illuminate it. The passage had caved in, making it impassable. She glanced nervously upwards at the crumbling stone ceiling, thinking about the tons of stone above her head and wishing again that she had her full magic. Steeling her nerve, she turned right, hoping she wouldn't have to excavate the other corridor.

Luna had not only stopped laughing, she had all but disappeared. For weeks before the fateful night, Celestia only saw her at morning and at night as they exchanged sun and moon – sometimes not even then. By that point, Celestia had figured out that something was wrong, and confronted Luna.

*"Sister, what is troubling you?"*

*"Nothing."*

*"Now, now, you know you can't hide things from me like that."*

*"I said nothing! Stop acting like you care!"*

*"But Luna..."*

*"I have to go."*

Celestia had let it go, hoping that Luna would get over it on her own. But as for where she was disappearing to - there were not many places that she could have gone. It had to have been down here, where nopony else went and where nopony would disturb her. Celestia searched on, hoping that there was something left to fill in the history.

The ancient corridors were not giving up their secrets easily, and Celestia was certainly glad that most of the tricks and traps had decayed over the millennium. Still, she once had to jump quickly when she accidentally triggered a trap slide that dropped out from underneath her, and she caught her breath more than once when a panel popped open to deliver a decayed puff of air – the ancient trap within disintegrated to dust. But eventually, after half a dozen junctions, three wrong turns, and a second collapsed tunnel - she finally detected something. She slowed her pace, studying the walls carefully. Her horn lit brighter so that she could inspect every crack in the walls, and she circled the area carefully.

She was tracing along the longer wall when she suddenly gasped abruptly and drew her spell back, stepping away from the wall. Something had reacted with her magic, causing a sensation not unlike a burn. She had found something... and the magic here was still active.

Her magic reached out again, more carefully this time. Again she felt the touch of ancient magic still active, but she worked carefully. It was weak but it could still trigger a trap. While most of Luna's traps were harmless enough - this felt different. At last, she felt a magical catch – a hook that would undo the spell's lock - and carefully triggered it. The burning magic evaporated and the wall fell away before her eyes; revealing a small, dark room.

After a moment, she entered the room and looked around carefully. It had preserved well enough that she could make out the

remains of an ornate bed, a writing desk, and elaborately patterned walls depicting nebulae and galaxies. While faded and in disrepair it was still a beautiful room, and Celestia was awed. After a moment, her attention turned to the writing desk and she approached it. Lifting the top open, she looked inside and saw a large book with an ornate clasp. Emblazoned on the cover was a crescent moon and the book still glowed faintly with ancient magic. Celestia lifted the book from the desk and then closed the desk so that she could place the book atop it.

As if it wasn't obvious, she could already tell from the feel of the magic that this was Luna's book. It seemed that the same protection spell meant to keep nosy sisters from opening it was likely responsible for the condition that it was still in. She probed the spell gently and smiled. It was definitely the locking spell of a young unicorn and she had no difficulty disarming it.

Finally, she could find out what had been on Luna's mind one thousand years ago.

Celestia opened to the first page, and read the careful printing therein.

*This book is the Property of LUNA and that means NO CELESTIA ALLOWED! I have put a spell on the book so YOU CAN'T READ IT! HAHA!*

Celestia smiled softly. "I'm sorry, sister. But I will have to ignore your warning."

She flipped ahead a few pages and leaned over the book to read the entry, only to frown. Although the ink was reasonably clear and the words appeared to be there, she found that she couldn't actually comprehend what she was reading. It was as if the words blurred and shifted across the page as she watched them, while simultaneously she was certain that they were not moving at all. It left her confused and a little dizzy, and she had to look away for a moment.

She flipped ahead to another page, only to find the same thing. She could tell that the entry was shorter and she could swear that there were real words on the page, but she didn't know what they said. Page after page did the same thing, until she had to close the book to prevent nausea.

"Clever sister," she mused to herself. "If I can't even study the book, it will be very hard to undo the spell." After a few moments, she lifted the book into the air again, and turned to leave the room. "But at least I think I have what I was looking for."

She left the room, and started back towards the stairs. "I'm sorry for snooping, Luna. I have to know what I should have done differently before I can face you again."

## Chapter 6 – Waxing Crescent

Nightmare Moon woke with a start. Her head lifted from the plush royal pillow and looked towards the open balcony with some curiosity and a disturbing sense of uncertainty. Something tugged at her distant memory but like a fading dream, she was unable to pinpoint what exactly had awakened her.

Frustrated she rose, making her way across the darkened room towards the opening. The full moon shone brightly down and cast a sloping glow into the room. Nightmare Moon stepped outside and looked up at the sky, studying it carefully. Every star seemed in its place and nothing moved there. Lowering her gaze she scanned the horizon, where distant towns were just visible. But again, there was no movement. Now that night was eternal she was able to sleep at the same time as most of the citizens, and so they were all likely still asleep.

A movement in the castle yard caught her eye and she smiled. Spreading her wings she lifted from the balcony and silently landed alongside the creeping creature that she had noticed.

"Difficulty sleeping, my liege?" Ulfrid's voice was bemused more than surprised, as he continued his patrol without breaking stride.

"What of you, Ulfrid? Do you never sleep?"

The large wolf stopped to bow and shook his great head. "I have my duties," he replied. When he stood again, he merely waited quietly.

Nightmare Moon cast her gaze towards the horizon again. Though she could see nothing from here, this was the direction that called most strongly to her memory. But there was nothing but the faded dream now. "I thought I sensed something," she said at last. "But perhaps it was nothing."

Ulfrid nodded and turned his head to follow her gaze. "Your Highness is not prone to false starts," he noted. "Would you like me to investigate?"

Nightmare Moon shook her head slowly. "No... at least, I could not tell you where to start. It was more of a memory."

Ulfrid smiled gently, "And you have many that might cause a midnight stir, my liege. But dwell not upon them, your humble creature stands guard over your resting hours. I have detected nothing that should trouble you."

Nightmare Moon looked at him carefully, and allowed herself a wider smile. "I should very much like to know more about you than I actually know, dear Ulfrid."

Ulfrid bowed again, his face nearly touching the ground. "If one day Her Highness were to tempt me with tea and donuts, I would not refuse to attend. Discussion over pastries could take many turns."

Nightmare Moon outright laughed at the mental image of this large wolf enjoying a plate full of donuts at her table, but it was not cruel laughter at all. To contrary, she felt her undefined concern melt away completely. Ulfrid held the pose until she quieted, then rose again with a large smile on his muzzle.

"Thank you, my friend," Nightmare Moon added. "I think I shall now take to the air... a cool wind will suit me nicely."

"Of course, my liege," replied Ulfrid. "You will be able to find me if you should need me."

As she took to the air, Nightmare Moon again wondered why that was always so.

Flying was effortless for the large alicorn and none who looked up would see more than a brief shadow as she flashed past. But Nightmare Moon chose to avoid populated areas and circled outwards over the peaks that surrounded Canterlot, and then further out. She was making a conscious effort to avoid giving credence to the strange feeling that woke her, and yet she soon found herself touching down in a small town near a vast, ancient forest. This town, Ponyville, called most strongly to her memory.

She walked the silent streets of the little village without a sound, looking around at the dark and shuttered houses that lined them. They were barely more than huts compared to the grand structures in Canterlot - many even bore simple straw roofs. But it was still early and the town was silent, its citizens still sleeping peacefully.

She had never put much thought into this town before and so she wondered what had drawn her here. Her last visit had been her first – to cancel the Summer Sun Celebration and announce her takeover ten years ago. She found herself before the town center, and looked up at the balcony where she had then stood.

*"Seize her! Only she knows where the Princess is!"*

Nightmare Moon snorted in amusement at the memory. The few royal guards on duty for the celebration were no match for her and the

haughty Mayor who ordered the attack spent nearly a year in prison for it. In fact, she thought, there had been only one actual threat here.

*"Remember this day, ponies, for it was your last! From this moment forth, the NIGHT WILL LAST FOREVER!"*

*"No it won't! I won't let you!"*

She had looked down just in time to see a powerful bolt of offensive magic launch from a bright amber unicorn, a blast that she had barely been able to deflect in time. It was mere luck that she had deflected it right back at the source, which had unnerved the caster enough to send her fleeing.

Despite ordering a search, she had never found that unicorn. She began to walk again and wondered whether letting it go had been a mistake. She wondered what she would do if she saw that unicorn again – or if she would even recognize her. Or what that unicorn would do to her...

It had been a decade - she hadn't received any report of threats against her for a long time. Perhaps that unicorn had fled to another land; perhaps she had actually been injured after all. But if she was any kind of threat, something would certainly have happened before now.

There was nothing here... no sense of powerful magic, no evidence of upheaval or disorder. Perhaps it really was just memories surfacing in a dream that had awakened her. Spreading her wings, she took to the air again, taking one more survey of the town.

This time she paused, again noting the forest that bordered the town. She had to think for a few moments about why that caught her eye, until she remembered which forest it was. A recent memory surfaced in her mind.

*"A report from Ponyville that a meteor struck the Everfree Forest."*

Her eyes scanned the forest treetops, curiously. The trees grew so thick that it was impossible to see through them, and she was not certain what she was even looking for. Suddenly a motion to the east of the forest caught her eye, and she noticed a train cresting the small hill, approaching Ponyville.

"If the morning train is arriving," she mused, "then the ministers in Canterlot will soon be starting their song and dance." She sighed to herself, and turned back towards the great city, giving her wings a powerful flap. "I had best be there when that happens. Besides, I am still the Princess of the Night. I have more important things to do than chase my own nightmares."

Yet she merely held her wings as she coasted on the currents, letting her speed slowly fade until she began to descend, finally circling and alighting in a field just outside the village. She looked back towards it again.

*"Your highness is not prone to false starts."*

Finally she shook her head, muttering to herself. "To Tartarus with the ministers." Her outline took on a bright blue glow and then began to shift, until she stood there as a much smaller, dark blue unicorn with only a black cloud on her flank.

'Night Shift' could rent a room in Ponyville for a day or two, long enough to set her mind at ease. Let the ministers panic, she was confident Ulfrid would just appear as if from around a corner if a true crisis occurred.

## Chapter 7 – Haze on the Horizon

*"Aw man, aren't you even going to try it out?"*

*"Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt. We need to know if it is what you say it is."*

*Stratosphere did a loop in place. "Righteous! Aw, man! I can't believe I'm going to see the Alicorn Amulet in practice!"*

*Captain Sterling lifted the amulet to his neck and wrapped the straps around behind, his magic deftly locking the fastener.*

*It was as if the entire world went white-hot. He could barely see, and there was an incredible heat to go with it. He could feel his magic leaking from his eye sockets as he surged and overloaded, and his hooves went to his throat, trying to rip the amulet free.*

*"THIS IS SO RADICAL!!!" shouted the pegasus. "I can't believe I'm watching this!"*

*Captain Sterling fell to his knees. It felt as though his life was draining out at an alarming rate as it fed the magical surge, and he could barely hold up his head. "Make... it... stop!" he begged.*

*"Sorry dude! I can't do magic! The book did say something about burning out, but man, you look AMAZING!"*

*"No! I... can't!" The entire world went white, and even sound began to distort as he felt the cool marble floor against his cheek, a sharp contrast to the flame against his throat.*

*"Oh, dude! This was so amazing! Thanks, Captain! My life is complete now! Um... bummer about it burning you out and all..."*

The kickback from the pegasus in his dream blasting back into the sky woke the Captain, and he panted softly, checking his throat to ensure that he was not actually wearing anything there.

After a few moments, he rose and went to his kitchen for a drink of water. His home was small and sparse, but immaculately neat and organized. He had little need for a home full of possessions; he was deployed to help in other cities far too often to be worth it.

His mind drifted back to the dream... it was clearly about the Alicorn Amulet. He considered his decision to withhold it from Nightmare Moon and now believed that to have been a mistake. He was

no expert in magical artifacts but if it was even a fraction as powerful as Stratosphere had suggested, then it needed to be destroyed. His hoof rubbed his throat gently as that thought was cemented in his mind.

Several hours later he found himself face-to-face with a green unicorn wearing square-lensed glasses and a thin black mane combed over the front of his head.

"What do you mean I *can't* see her?" he asked for the sixth time.

"Do you have an appointment?" asked Crossed Tees.

"I don't *need* an appointment," repeated Captain Sterling. "I'm the *Captain* of the *Guard*."

"Every pony needs an appointment," repeated Crossed. "I've already offered to put you on the advanced schedule for next month's court. Without rules and order we're little better than the wild frontier."

Sterling Honor frowned and put his muzzle right up against the minister's muzzle. He spoke slowly and very deliberately. "You will find the Queen and tell her that I need to speak with her, or I will draft you into the guard just so that I can charge you with insubordination and show you what rules and regulations are *really* all about. Now, **where is she?**"

Crossed Tees swallowed nervously, mentally checking off the laws regarding the guard, and decided that the Captain might not actually be bluffing.

"I'm... she..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "She's indisposed."

Captain Sterling was at the limit of his patience and spoke through a tightly clenched jaw. "Which means *what*, exactly?"

"Well... you see... she... she didn't show up for the 8AM daily schedule review." His voice dropped even lower. "No pony knows where she is."

Captain Sterling's head drew back in surprise, his pupils shrinking. "What?! And you didn't think that the Captain of the Guard should know that the Queen is missing?"

Crossed drew himself up, and frowned. "We didn't want to create a panic or destabilize the government! We must maintain order at all costs."

Captain Sterling paused just long enough to narrow his eyes. "I loathe you," he stated. Then he turned and galloped off to find his sergeant. He exited the castle corridors and ran across the parade square,

which was quiet this morning. As he turned towards the offices on the other side, he was forced to draw to a quick stop by Ulfrid blocking his path.

"Ah, Captain Sterling Honor," he greeted. "I was looking for you!"

"You were?" Sterling's eyes narrowed.

Ulfrid nodded. "Indeed. No doubt you are aware that the Princess was absent this morning from her meeting with the ministers?"

"Yes, I was briefed on the *Queen's* absence. I was about to organize a search for information."

Ulfrid smiled. "That will not be necessary, Captain. She is well, you needn't trouble yourself."

Sterling Honor shook his head. "It is my duty to trouble myself. Where has she gone?"

"I am not at liberty to share that information."

"When will she return?"

"I'm afraid I cannot share that either."

The Captain frowned. "You are putting me in a difficult situation. You are requiring me to take at your word that her unexpected absence is not a concern for the guard, but without telling me anything of where she has gone or for how long."

Ulfrid dipped his head in recognition. "Indeed, that is what I am asking of you."

"I suppose that you will be in charge during her absence?"

The wolf shook his head. "That should not be necessary."

"I think as a matter of security that I should still know where she is!"

"Nay, Captain, and that will be all." With the simple dismissal, Ulfrid turned and walked off. Captain Sterling stared after him for a moment, then turned and marched smartly back to his office.

Once safely behind the closed door, however, his frustration reached a peak. He slammed a hoof against his desk and glowered in the direction of his closed door.

"Security is *my* responsibility," he snapped. "Even the *wolf* has no right to withhold information from me!"

Again he found himself looking up at the portrait of Nightmare Moon, gazing longingly into her slitted eyes.

*"It would be enough to know for certain that this is how you want it, Ma'am," he thought. "Did you truly not trust me with this information? Or is he biding something? I just wish I knew for sure!"*

He gazed around the immaculate office slowly, finally stopping on the safe in the corner of the room. It was there he had locked up the Alicorn Amulet for safe-keeping. His hoof unconsciously went to his throat as he considered it.

*"I could know for certain... a scrying spell of that level wouldn't need that much power."*

His mind ran circles around the idea.

*"But it's certainly dangerous... it would be foolish to take such a risk without cause. No, I should see it destroyed. We must have a magic expert somewhere in the court who would know how."*

He paused again with his eyes locked on the safe, considering what he knew and what he didn't know.

*"What if the wolf really is attempting a takeover? He's just a wolf, right? But if he's just a wolf... where is the Queen? Did he somehow overcome her?"*

After a few more minutes of consideration, he turned from the desk and strode to Sergeant Impulse's office. The amulet made a fine backup plan but right now, he needed information.

"Sergeant Impulse!" he announced as he entered. The Sergeant's office was a stark contrast to his own, with paperwork strewn randomly across the desk and stacked untidily on the shelves along the wall.

Sergeant Impulse stood rapidly at attention and saluted, which Captain Sterling returned smartly. Up close the Sergeant's shaved mane looked almost laughable, but he withheld his amusement.

"Sir! What can I do for you, Sir?"

Captain Sterling nodded as he replied. "At ease, Sergeant. Is Corporal Stratosphere still in the city?"

"Yes, Sir. He wasn't due to deploy until tomorrow night, Sir."

"Send him to my office, and deploy somepony else in his place. Tell nopony else. I have a classified mission that I need him to undertake immediately."

Sergeant Impulse looked a little concerned. "Is everything okay, Sir?"

Captain Sterling nodded. "I think so, but I just need a little recon. It will only take a few days. Send him to my office."

Sergeant Impulse saluted again, "Yes Sir! He will be there within the hour."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

Captain Sterling walked back to his office, considering what he was doing. A little reconnaissance wasn't treason. After all, it was a matter of national security.

## Chapter 8 – Soaring on the Breeze

Corporal 'Stratosphere' Racing Wind was an ex-showpony, an ex-hippie, and an ex-Wonderbolt. In his first life, he was trying to fulfill a childhood dream of acquiring magic through hard work and practice. His sleight-of-hoof was good, but meant little in a world of true unicorns. He ended up settling in a remote nature spa, working to create natural products and live as simple a life as possible. This was pleasant, but he never felt quite satisfied.

It's often the most unexpected things that change one's life, and even his simple life didn't prepare him for how easily his purpose came to him. While flying a delivery of supplies for the spa back from the nearby village, he found his path blocked by a towering thunderhead cloud. Without thinking about it, he soared upwards to fly over it. As he crested the top of the cloud he was struck by the cold, steady wind of the jet stream, and found he'd climbed higher than even the weather ponies usually did.

Rather than dip back down to a safer altitude, he had a rush of euphoria. The wind ruffled his feathered wings in a way that felt like caresses and he found that he was able to anticipate the blasts and eddies, soon using them to his advantage. He was hours late back from his errand but he didn't care. Even better, he'd finally earned his cutie mark and he knew exactly what he was meant to do – to soar the high altitude currents where few dared to go.

His flight skills eventually led him to try out for the premiere flying team in Equestria – the Wonderbolts. He made it through the Academy with honors and his fast, agile flight served him well in the flight team. His only problem was that he found it extremely boring. He had been considering quitting the team when Night fell and suddenly the Wonderbolts were no longer required. He found himself in front of a recruiting officer for the new Royal Guard.

*"The Lunar Guard is looking for the best fliers. Now, I know you've heard a lot of nasty rumors about us, so I am going to tell you right up front that we aren't going to punish you for saying no. But, I've heard that you're a heck of a flier."*

*"Yeah, dude, I mean... I'm pretty good."*

*"You don't sound very proud of it."*

*"I can be honest here?"*

*"Of course. I'm just the recruiting officer, I'm not here to judge you."*

*"Well, dude, I'm just... the Wonderbolts are just really boring, you know? All that formation flying and stuff."*

*"But, you're very good at it. And your cutie mark clearly involves flight. What more do you want?"*

*"Dude... I want to soar! I was made for altitude! But man, the Wonderbolts never fly so high... it's hard for some dudes to stay up there, and the ponies on the ground can't see us anyway!"*

*"You can fly that high? Stable flight?"*

*"Dude! It's like I've gone home every time I'm up there!"*

*The recruiting officer smiled. "How's your eyesight, son?"*

It turned out that his eyesight was very, *very* good. He was uniquely qualified for stealth reconnaissance and had already flown many missions. Now, he was possibly flying his most important mission yet.

He banked towards the east and flapped a few more times to gain extra altitude and cast his sharp eyes downward to scan the ground. From up here, he could see for miles in every direction, but it required some mental focus to be able to make out details below.

*"You understand your mission?"*

*"Yes, sir! I'm totally on it!"*

*"Find the Queen, or evidence of her location. Tell nopony, don't be seen."*

*"Don't make contact and report back to you. Dude, don't worry, I'm the best pony for the job!"*

He'd already checked all of Canterlot and the surrounding area, and done a preliminary pass of the mountain ranges. The next closest town was Ponyville. It was approaching noon and he could already see ponies making their way here and there – no doubt for lunch. Still, it took him another fifteen minutes to be close enough to start looking for details.

His sharp eyes scanned the village carefully. A pony trying to hide something wouldn't make it obvious to any passing pegasus, but Stratosphere had a knack for noticing things out of the ordinary. His eyes passed over the town square carefully as he circled, taking the time to look at each structure. Houses, a furniture shop, numerous stands in a small market, a bakery... wait!

There was definitely something suspicious about the pony that just emerged from the bakery. She wore a cloak over her body and she was moving too carefully, looking around too often as she stashed a bag

of baked good under her cloak. He circled lower, still well out of easy notice, and watched as she kept to the sides of the street and clearly tried not to draw too much attention to herself. He noticed something else, too. Even from far above, the way her crimson striped mane flowed around her amber face struck a chord with him, and though cautious, she moved with a confidence that was very appealing.

He followed slowly as she turned down the street, watching her with growing admiration until she turned down an alley and pulled her cloak's hood up over her head. Now she was just a shadow amongst shadows and he had to focus to keep her in his sight – a moment's broken contact would complete her camouflage and even he would have trouble finding her again.

She moved quickly through the streets of the little village, never staying in one direction for too long, often turning and sometimes even doubling back, but he could tell she wasn't lost. He drifted with her, far overhead, until he realized she was making her way out to the edge of town. She hesitated once more, looking left and right, and then with a sudden flash of magic she was gone.

He scanned the area again. Teleport spells were still a rare magic, but even the most talented unicorn couldn't travel very far without a large amount of power. He was that certain that she just didn't want anypony to know which building she had gone into, but, there were only a half dozen in reasonable range and then the edge of the town. He studied each carefully and committed them to memory, although he saw nothing that felt out of place. Still, it was good place to start.

Suddenly something else caught his eye. Another unicorn, dark blue and so still that he had barely noticed her, was laying on the roof of an inn just a couple of blocks over. Her attention was focused past the edge of town, and he followed her line of sight into the Everfree Forest.

Again he frowned. Ponies didn't go into the Everfree Forest, not even the Royal Guard. But something felt wrong about it, very wrong. He couldn't articulate it, and he wasn't psychic by any means, but as his eyes scanned the dense canopy something just FELT out of place.

He debated with himself for a moment, holding his position. Something needed to be investigated here, but he didn't have anything concrete to take back. He cast his gaze towards the horizon – there was still a lot of Equestria to check out, and he wasn't expected back for a couple of days.

Finally he made his choice and turned downwards, diving silently towards the ground. He curved upwards just before striking, landing

quietly on all four hooves between a couple of small houses within view of the path into the forest. There in the distance his sharp eyes picked out a flash of crimson tail vanishing into the trees.

He hesitated yet again, the forest was about as far from his native element as he could get.

*"I should just report what I've seen. I don't have to go in there."*

The thought made sense, but he thought again about the way she'd tossed her head as she brought up the hood. It would sure be nice to see her up close – and he had the authority to question her.

*"Dude, bad idea. I'm not supposed to be seen or make contact."*

He reasoned further, then. If he followed her long enough to see what she was up to and could see it was nothing to do with the Queen, then he certainly could say hello without compromising his mission.

*"Well... that makes sense. Yeah, I'll just scope the situation first. I wouldn't want to lose the first clue I found, anyway."*

He charged into the forest along the path he had seen her on. He remembered reaching the point where she had vanished into the woods, but it was some time before he remembered anything else.

## Chapter 9 – Red in the Morning

While Stratosphere was being assigned his task in Canterlot, the Ponyville Express arrived in Ponyville on time at 8:15am. Nightfall had not affected the efficiency of the rail system, although ponies were far less prone to engage in idle conversation or ask questions of those traveling on it anymore. The station was quiet as Sunset Shimmer stepped off the train and flipped up her hood. Her brightly colored fur was very visible in the moonlight and she preferred to be a shadow when she could be.

She made her way to the street and looked around herself. It had been a long time since she'd been to Ponyville. She had been afraid of capture and the proximity to Canterlot; even now she was looking and half-expecting to see the Night Guard converging on her. But those ponies who were on the street paid her little mind. She finally allowed herself to relax and considered her next move.

She wanted to charge straight to the ancient castle, but she knew that was not a wise move. She still wanted to write a response in her book, something that would both indicate acceptance and buy her some time if it was a trap. She would also need to collect some supplies before entering the forest. And then... her heart caught in her throat. What if it was true? What if Celestia was back?

*Then it will be time to face your past.*

She nodded to the shadows and swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. Her old teacher would know what to do and she was ready to face the consequences of her failures - if it meant that they could now be put right.

Her first move, now decided, was breakfast. She made her way to the Oat Barn, which was one of the few restaurants in town, and was pleased to see that it was still where she remembered it. She ordered a breakfast sandwich and a glass of honey sweetened water, and then made her way back to a quiet corner seat.

After a few bites of her sandwich she withdrew her book and a quill from her saddlebag. She'd had the entire train ride to consider what to write, and upon reaching a blank page, started immediately.

*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*I have started preparations for the Summer Sun Celebration as you requested, and I look forward to meeting you and receiving your assistance.*

*I regret to inform you that due to a personal matter, we will be unable to meet as soon as you arrive. I expect that I will be delayed by six hours, but I will find you when I return. You may trust that all is moving forward while you wait.*

*Your student,  
Sunset Shimmer*

She watched as the glowing ink faded, and then glanced around to see if any other pony had noticed. She quickly closed the book and stored it back into her saddlebag before it could respond and then relaxed a moment as she finished her sandwich.

Her phrasing hadn't been terribly subtle, but it should be enough. She had really wanted to write 'tomorrow' instead of 'six hours', but anypony who knew the Summer Sun Celebration would know that Celestia wouldn't be staying overnight. She was already pushing it to expect that six hours was a reasonable time, but Celestia had hinted in her entry that she'd be helping to set up. The gamble was reasonable, she hoped.

A few supplies and she could be on her way, with plenty of time to pre-empt any traps set against her.

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Much later, Sunset Shimmer trod grumpily down an alley, having finally escaped from the outdoor sports supply store. When she told the elderly shop keeper that she planned to scale the Smokey Mountain off White Tail Woods - a cover story that she had thought very clever - he had first seen fit to lecture her extensively on how proper ponies don't do things like that anymore.

"Far too dangerous. Stupid, too. Why would you climb a mountain in the dark? I don't even know if Nightmare Moon would allow it!"

"It's... I'm... don't worry. I... uh... I have a permit already."

With the lecture behind her, the shop keeper proceeded to bring out what seemed to Sunset to be every single piece of merchandise in his inventory - one piece at a time. Ropes, lamps, anchors, belay devices, blankets... it went on and on. In particular, an exceptionally long comparison between six different types of carabiners grated on Sunset's patience until she finally agreed to buy several of each of them.

"I have these real humdingers - magical firestarters! Don't need nothing to make a spark!"

Sunset Shimmer had sighed and shown him that she had a horn, to which he grunted. "Even a unicorn needs help now and then."

So it had continued for what felt like forever. But once they had finally settled on the inventory for her grand climb, the totaling of the bill seemed to take nearly as long. It also took most of her bits. But finally she was bundled up, and the gear was loaded into a huge canvas sack and balanced on her back. She had thanked the shop keeper and staggered directly into the nearest alley, where she dropped the gear with a grunt.

*Real inconspicuous, Sunset.*

"Shut up," she told the shadows. "I just wanted to get out of there."

She opened the canvas and began to sift through the inventory, extracting the things that she felt she really would need in the forest. She selected a single coil of rope and some accessories for handling it. She kept two blankets and the first aid kit, and even two of the ration kits, leaving the rest up against the wall of the building. As she coiled the rope and secured it to her flank, she grinned.

"Too bad he didn't have a hat... I could be just like Daring Do." She mused for a moment. "Must be the only thing he *didn't* have."

She made her way to the end of the alley and then paused as she looked across the intersection she had reached. Before her, unmistakably, was the town bakery. While most of the buildings in town were rather plain and non-descript, this one stood out by being anything but. The walls resembled gingerbread, and the roof and corners appeared to be frosted. The delicious scent of sweet baking wafted across the intersection towards her.

She scuffed the ground in frustration... she didn't want to be tempted. But an unbidden thought had risen in her mind - she hadn't finished her birthday cupcake. It was the only treat she had all year, surely she deserved it?

*Especially if this is a trap. It might be my last cupcake for a long time.*

She sighed softly and then made her way across the intersection. Glancing around, she pushed the door open.

It wasn't exactly bright inside, but contrary to many buildings the glow of both lamps and fire was warm and inviting, and the air smelled of cookies merrily baking. Sunset smiled widely and lowered her hood in spite of herself, and then stepped in deeper to approach the counter. A bright pink pony grinned at her from behind the counter.

"Hi there!" called the pink pony. "Welcome to Sugar Cube Corner! Everything's fresh from this morning and ready to eat!" She pointed into the display case. "These muffins are even still warm!"

"Um, hi," replied Sunset. "I'll be quick, I have somewhere I need to be. Do you have any honey oat cupcakes?"

"Yepperdoodle!" cheered the pony. "How many do you want?"

Sunset hummed, then smiled, "How about two? I need to share with a friend."

"What's the occasion?" asked the shop keeper as she went about getting a box for the two cupcakes.

Sunset was caught off guard and replied as casually as she could. "Oh! It's, uh, it's my birthday."

The shop pony was right in front of Sunset with a speed and suddenness that almost scared her, and she spoke with wide, excited eyes. "A birthday!! Happy Birthday! My name's Pinkamena, but my friends call me Pinkie! And you know: I throw the best birthday parties in Equestria!" She then paused, and looked a little cowed, folding her ears as if she knew that she was overreacting. She offered the cupcake box with considerably more restraint. "Uh... do you think you might want one?"

Sunset accepted the box, and then shook her head slowly. "No... no, I'm sorry. I have to leave town and won't be here for it."

*Not to mention half the Night Guard is probably still looking for me.*

Pinkie looked a little startled, and then narrowed her eyes and stared deeply into Sunset's eyes. She held the gaze until Sunset began to get nervous and took a step backwards.

"You'd better be careful then," Pinkie said slowly, her voice sounding a little distant. Suddenly she seemed to snap back to her own self and beamed. "Aaaannnnndd, I need to give you a free piece of Cloud Cake to take with you!"

Sunset was too startled to react as Pinkie brought out a large cake and proceeded to cut a slice. *"She couldn't possibly have heard that, could she?"* she wondered. *"Just a coincidence... it has to be..."*

"Here you go!" sang Pinkie, as she pushed the extra box towards Sunset. "And when you're done, come back, okay?"

Sunset stored the cupcakes in her saddlebag, and accepted the new box, still a little hesitant. "Thank you," she said carefully. "How much do I owe you?"

Pinkie smiled. "It's your birthday," she replied. "It's on me!"

"Thank you again," repeated Sunset, much more sincerely this time. "Could I trouble you for the time?"

Pinkie glanced up at a back wall, "It's just about noon!"

Sunset's eyes narrowed into points. "Horse feathers! I have to go! Thank you!"

Pinkie waved a hoof excitedly, "Don't forget to come back and tell me all about it!"

Sunset stepped out into the street again, looking left and right. Inwardly she was cursing up a storm. She'd wasted too much time with the sports shop and then she had to come waste time at the bakery just for a cupcake. She had nearly burned all the time she'd bought for herself with her message.

She stored the cake under her cloak, magically securing it between her full saddlebags. She then ducked down a nearby alley and paused a moment to regroup.

*It's all right. We still have at least two hours. We can be at the ruins in one. Just be cautious.*

She tossed her head defiantly and flipped her hood up. "They haven't caught me yet," she reminded the shadows. "They aren't about to succeed today."

Still, as she navigated the village, she felt eyes upon her at every turn. She turned frequently and doubled back a few times, but she couldn't see anypony actually following her. Finally, she was at the edge of town. The eyes on her felt doubled now and she frowned, looking around the few buildings still lining the little path.

After a moment's thought she smirked and lit her horn, holding for a few seconds to build up power while she looked ahead. Then she cast, disappearing in a flash of light, and reappearing as deep into the forest as she could see. She quickly ran a few strides deeper, then turned into the dense brush at the side of the path and covered herself fully in her cloak, watching the path she came from.

It was only a few minutes before a blue pony came charging down the path, and she cursed inwardly. So somepony WAS following her. Still, she had a few moments to act and she had already been preparing the spell.

She cast again and this time the blue pony froze in mid-stride, tumbling forward and landing stiff as a board with a confused look on his face. She watched the path for a few more minutes, but no other pony followed.

She got up carefully and approached the pony to look him over. Her spell would keep him suspended for a while, long enough for her to

disappear again, but she had to know who he was. He was a sky-blue pegasus, wearing flight goggles and a protective fabric headpiece. Her breath caught as she noticed he was lightly armored - a dark blue armor tagged with a turquoise crescent moon.

"Horse-apples!" she cursed. "It IS the Lunar Guard." She looked back along the path again. Compared to the dark of the forest, the distant opening of the path positively glowed, but no silhouette blocked the moonlight that filtered in there. She looked back at him again. Many thoughts went through her mind but she didn't know what to do. A more permanent spell would take a lot of magic and would certainly be traceable. Taking him with her was risky too and would all but admit guilt.

*He might not have recognized you. There are any number of reasons to question a pony entering the Everfree Forest.*

Sunset nodded and fretted for a few more minutes anyway. She looked deeper into the forest where the ruins still lay an hour away. Celestia would know what to do... there was probably time to get there and back, but...

She had an idea and smiled softly as she lit her horn again. She drew a piece of scroll and a quill and scribbled a short note, then pinned it to the pegasus' chest. "I hope you're just stupid," she said softly. She uttered a light laugh and turned back into the woods, beginning the hike to the ruins of the Castle of the Two Sisters.

## Chapter 10 - First Quarter

Arriving from the field that Nightmare Moon had landed in, Night Shift strode confidently into Ponyville. She found the dark morning streets quiet and with only a few ponies about, heading to their morning jobs. They tended to move slowly, heads down, never looking around and rarely changing their pace. She found herself somewhat surprised. She had been told that most villages had settled into daily life by now, but these ponies still seemed rather disheartened.

Curiosity overwhelmed her; she approached a pale green unicorn and called out pleasantly.

"Pardon me, I've just arrived in town. Can you direct me to the inn?"

It took the other unicorn a moment to notice her, and when his head finally came up, he first looked around to see who else was in the area. Night Shift scuffed the dirt in impatience before he finally spoke.

"Um... were you talking to me?"

Night Shift rolled her eyes. "Of course I was talking to you... do you see any other pony nearby?"

Again the unicorn looked around. "Mmm... no. No, I guess not. It's unusual for anypony to talk on the street anymore. I'm sorry... what did you want to know?"

"Why is it unusual?" pressed Night Shift. "I had thought that ponies were used to the night by now?"

The unicorn rubbed the back of his neck with a hoof in a somewhat embarrassed fashion. "Well... um, yes, I guess so. But things never exactly got back to normal, did they? I mean... it's still dark. Who knows what else might happen?"

Night Shift frowned. "*Nothing* else is going to happen," she stressed.

The stallion laughed, weakly. "Well... yes, I guess not. Um, I need to get to work. Bye now!"

Night Shift rolled her eyes again and side-stepped to block his path. "The inn," she repeated. "Where would I find it?"

"Ah, right, right! Umm..." He paused a moment in thought, and then raised a hoof to point down one of the narrow streets. "Down there, I think. Head straight down Appletail Lane - it's right on the far edge of

town. If you see the forest, though, stop. You went too far, and you don't want to go into that forest."

Night Shift tilted her head. "Why? What is wrong with the forest?"

The stallion's eyes widened a bit. "Wow, you *are* from out of town, aren't you?" He peered at her for a moment, then continued. "Everfree forest just isn't safe - it's not right, either. It doesn't work the same way as the rest of Equestria, and the creatures there are wild. Everypony knows to just stay clear."

Night Shift nodded, slowly. She had of course been briefed on the Everfree forest over the years but she had never had cause to visit it, not even strong desire to see her old castle. Seeing the pony's seriousness was very different from merely listening to a briefing, however. It was amazing to think that the forest holding the ruins of her old home had become so wild.

After a moment she noticed the pony still staring at her, and she shook off the old memories. She nodded briefly, "Straight ahead, stay out of the forest. Thank you."

"Um, all right," replied the stallion, turning and walking off without a further word. Night Shift watched him go for a moment, and then shook her own head, starting off down the road again.

At last, she spied a weather-beaten sign on a building to her left: "Come On Inn". She smirked at somepony's idea of a pun, and then lit her horn to open the door. She looked around as she strode inside. The interior was built of rough-hewn wood, dimly lit by a single enchanted lantern on the narrow countertop lining one wall. She strode up to the counter and, upon seeing no pony present, used her magic to ring the small silver bell that sat next to the lantern.

Minutes passed without response. She rang the bell a second time, more insistently, and then several minutes later, she lifted it into the air and began striking it repeatedly.

The door behind her opened with a slight creak, and she turned to see an older, orange furred earth pony enter. He was carrying two saddlebags loaded with vegetables, and he looked up as she stopped ringing the bell.

"Oh, gracious, were you looking for me? So sorry, so sorry. Stepped out for a bit of morning shopping... not that you can tell it's morning, eh? Hah! Looking for a room, then?"

Night Shift sighed. "Yes, I shall require a room for two nights, at most. I shall be required back in Canterlot by then."

The orange stallion made his way behind the counter, removing his saddlebags and setting them on the floor there. "Ah, you're one of them bureaucrats, eh? Come to enjoy a couple of days in the country?"

She paused, and then nodded. "Aye, something like that. Will you be able to accommodate me?"

The stallion laughed, throwing his head back and braying like a donkey. "Hah! That's a good one! Why, hardly anypony travels these days – you've got the run of the place." He reached below the counter, bringing up a large key. "I figure I'll put you up in the penthouse, seeing as how you're from Canterlot and all. But if you need something smaller, just give me a shout. Name's Frank. Frank Lecture. I used to teach when I was a lot younger, now I just putter around here."

"I thank you," replied Night Shift. "But why do you say ponies do not travel? I observed the train arriving this morning?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, everything's still running. Ponies just have a thing about traveling in the dark, you know? Makes them nervous."

Night Shift bristled. "It's not that dark. There is the moon."

"Oh, yeah, yeah, fine if you're a unicorn. But the rest of us have to use our eyes, and the moon leaves a lot of shadow. Anyway," Frank waved a hoof to dismiss the argument. "I know you've got to say that, and I ain't looking for trouble. Room'll be 60 bits for the two nights."

Night Shift paused, and then nodded without a further word. She lit her horn and summoned the coins, and then placed them on the counter. She then locked a levitation field around the key and attempted to take it from Frank, only to find him holding fast.

"Before I give you this, I got to make sure you know about the Everfree Forest. Your room looks right over it, and it's a lovely view and all, but the forest ain't fit to enter, you understand? I don't have to tell locals, but I've never seen you before, and I don't know what you were told in Canterlot."

"Of course, but... what is wrong with it?" With another mention of Everfree's dangers, she found herself wondering what this pony's warning would be.

"Ever since Nightfall, the monsters in there got real brave. They don't always honor the edge of the forest, and the guards aren't always that quick about driving them back. Just stay in town and you'll be fine. If you wander too close to the edge, well, there are creatures in there that

won't think twice about snatching a pony like you, and your magic won't do you a lick of good. You hear me?"

Night Shift nodded again, feeling a chill along her spine despite herself. Frank released the key and she levitated it closer to herself.

Frank smiled kindly. "I don't mean to scare you, Miss, that's just the way things are. Say, could I get your name for the records? Just need to put something down."

Night Shift nodded yet again, and returned the smile. "Of course. I am... Night Shift."

The old stallion cackled. "Of course you are." He smiled kindly, and then added, "Couldn't be more appropriate, eh?" He pointed over her shoulder and continued speaking. "Up those stairs to the top, you'll see your door right in front of you. Enjoy your stay in Ponyville, Miss Shift."

There were only three levels to the hotel, and it did not take long to reach the top. Night Shift used the key, and then applied her magic to push the heavy wooden door. As it swung open she stepped into the room, and then reversed the field to close the door behind herself. The room was about half the size of the lobby downstairs, very plain but neatly made up. A double bed stuck out from the side wall, and a small writing desk adorned the corner. Across from the desk was a small vanity with a heart-shaped mirror, and next to that a small window covered with a neatly pressed curtain.

She approached the window and slid the curtain aside, looking over the promised view of the forest. She could very nearly see over the canopy from here, although taller trees prevented seeing very far. The moon's bright light illuminated the tops of the trees, but beneath that all she could see was darkness, where she could see through at all.

She examined the window and found that she could push it open, smiling as she did so. Her horn then lit and her body glowed faintly, dissolving into a cloud of purple smoke. Deftly, the smoke flew out the window and then doubled back and up, settling over the peak of the roof where it once again condensed into the small, dark blue unicorn. Night Shift laid herself down and looked over the forest, as she was now high enough to see quite far.

Her thoughts turned again to her old castle – known today as the ruins of the "Castle of the Two Sisters". She snorted - it had started out that way, before it was "Celestia's Castle where Luna just happened to stay". But the ember of anger faded quickly and she lifted her head to look in the direction that she felt it must lay.

*"I wonder what's left of it?" she mused. "It must be in very poor shape by now..."*

She thought back to when she had last seen it, and realized that it had been a very long time indeed. Over a thousand years ago she had stood on the dais, looking down at Celestia. Her anger had reached a breaking point, and she had finally moved against her sister.

*Did you really think I would just stand idly by while they all basked in your precious light?*

She had worked for months on the spell. Her only goal: to increase her power level enough to overcome her older sister's. She had brought together magic from the unicorns, the zebra, the dragons, even the griffins; melding the arcane and the contemporary into a spell that had never been attempted before. The spell was designed to draw power from the land and the forest itself, converting it and feeding it into herself. But it was also a showpiece of a spell – eclipsing the sun as she flew before it and turning her coat as black as midnight. With the show she meant to induce awe and, she had hoped, a little fear. It had worked perfectly – enhancing her every attribute.

*"Including my anger,"* she thought. But rather than fear, her sister had responded in the same calm, lecturing tone she'd been using against her for months.

*Luna! I will not fight you! You must **lower** the moon! It is your duty!*

Luna had attacked first, and for a while Celestia only dodged her magical beams. But when Celestia did fight back, it wasn't enough. Night Shift thought back to when her magic finally struck home, causing Celestia to issue a scream of pain and surprise as she fell from the sky. At the time, she had thought her victory complete and laughed triumphantly. Now... now she was not so sure that she liked the memory. That blast might have killed Celestia and the thought now left her uneasy. The exile was a much better punishment. In a thousand years... who knows? Perhaps, with the score settled, they could try again.

Her musings were interrupted by the sense of a pony approaching on the street below, and she looked down to see who it might be. Soon enough a hooded pony appeared, moving along the buildings and looking very much like she was expecting to be followed. Night Shift watched, curious as to what this pony was watching out for.

The pony moved out of the last fork and along the road leading out of town, pausing near the last of the buildings. Night Shift was certain that she caught the gleam of a smile beneath the hood before the pony winked out of existence. She blinked in surprise. Teleportation magic was

uncommon and difficult for an average unicorn to track, but she was able to follow the spell along until she detected the pony re-appear inside the Everfree forest. Dark as it was, her senses allowed her to see the pony step off the path and crouch down under her cloak.

Curiosity became intrigue as she heard a swoosh of air over the road and turned her attention back into town. There she was surprised to see a sky-blue pegasus alighting on the road, wearing the distinctive marks of her Royal Guard. But it was a lighter armor, and she was not completely certain she recognized it. A scout?

The pegasus looked around the structures but his main attention was focused down the path into the forest. He paced and seemed to be muttering to himself. Night Shift was amused – had she managed to observe the escape of a fugitive? She wondered whether she should fly down and show this guard where the pony was hiding. Would the guard be honored or frightened?

Her decision was made for her as the pegasus' mood changed abruptly. He brightened visibly, even from this distance, and got a ridiculously silly grin on his goggled face. Without another moment's hesitation he charged directly into the forest, looking like he couldn't wait to get there.

Night Shift felt certain that she recognized the change in posture, and she rolled her eyes. She had not stumbled onto a pursuit but a tryst, and she had no need to watch any further. Turning back into the cloud of purple smoke she made her way back in through the window to her room, deliberately ignoring the next flash of magic she sensed from inside the woods. She pulled the window closed as she considered what she had seen.

*"The forest may indeed be dangerous. But it is very private, isn't it?"* She chuckled to herself as her hooves touched the floor again. *"Although I suspect that guard may have been on duty. I should probably tell Captain Sterling Honor about this."* She drew the blinds as she considered taking advantage of her impromptu vacation to nap, more amused than angry. Even love blossomed under her Moon, what had all the fuss ever been about?

She stretched out on the bed. Although it would have been small for her in alicorn form; in her smaller disguise it was quite comfortable. She smiled softly to herself as her eyes closed. *"Perhaps a couple of days in the country is all I need after all..."* she thought to herself. *"After my nap, I think I will see if I can find a nice slice of cake and a tea, and just sit and watch the ponies for a change."*

She succeeded in dozing off, only to wake with a start. She blinked a few times and rolled to her feet, turning her head towards the tiny window and opening the blinds with her magic.

*"I couldn't have been asleep more than an hour," she wondered. "But that was no dream and no vague sense."*

Her eyes locked in the direction of her castle ruins.

*"That was a magic surge and it came from the ruins, I am certain of it."*

She was surprised to see a pegasus darting over the forest. From the distance, she couldn't make him out, but she could see the sky blue coat. She could also see that, if it was the same pegasus, his attitude was completely different from earlier. As she watched, he dove straight down into the trees.

Night Shift pushed the window open again, and her body again dissolved into the misty purple smoke. She darted out the window and headed directly for the woods.

*"I don't know what's going on... but if somepony is just playing games, they are going to be very sorry that they got my attention."*

## Chapter 11 - Layers of the Wind

The first thing that Corporal Stratosphere noticed when he regained consciousness was that his muzzle was full of dirt. It was old and rather unpleasant tasting; he spit it out as best he could. He sat up, slowly, and sneezed before trying to brush his muzzle clean. His head felt fuzzy and for a moment he couldn't remember why it was so dark.

Gradually his senses returned to him. He noted the forest around him and the entrance only a few hundred feet down the path. He began to remember where he was and why. He was in the Everfree forest. He had run in here after a suspiciously beautiful crimson-maned mare, whom he had intended to interrogate over dinner (assuming she wasn't actually a criminal, of course). He had charged in on hoof to catch up to her... and then he didn't remember what happened.

His hoof ran down over his face as he tried to remember, dragging across it and then down his own chest, where it rustled a piece of paper. Somewhat surprised, he looked down and removed a pinned note from his flight suit.

"Hi!" began the note. He smiled at the clean cursive writing. Already he was envisioning his suspect writing the note with extravagant flourishes, and maybe a toss or two of that beautiful long mane. He hadn't seen enough to know how long it really was, but it suited his imagination to visualize it as extremely long and flowing on an eternal breeze.

*"Found you stoned by cockatrice. Cast antidote. Be more careful. A friend."*

He grinned further. A friend - that was definitely wonderful news. She already considered him a friend. But he began to think about the rest of the note.

"A cockatrice?" he wondered, looking around slowly. He patted his own body down carefully, checking for remnants of stone. "No... I seem to be okay. Dude... lucky for me she was a unicorn, though."

He looked into the woods again, and sighed to himself. "I'll never find her now," he noted. "I don't even know which way to start." He cast his eyes skyward but could see no trace of the sky through the thick canopy of the trees. "I don't have much hope of seeing anything through that. Still... I suppose it's worth a quick try. Then I'll head over to Hoofington and continue my search."

He walked back towards the entrance to the forest. "This is silly," he told himself. "Why am I even looking for her? I have a mission."

But his mind drifted back to that carefree mane toss from under the hood, now embellished with the flowing mane and continuous breeze of his fantasies, and he chuckled softly. "Oh yeah. Well, never let it be said I didn't try!"

He reached the edge of the canopy and launched into the air immediately, cutting a sharp bank back over the treetops before angling upwards to gain altitude. It felt wonderful to be back in the sky again and his blood flowed warm and free into his wings, revitalizing them and releasing any cramps that the forest had induced.

Once he was satisfied with his altitude he leveled off and began a slow circle. The Everfree Forest was relatively large, larger by far than Ponyville itself, and he had to focus to keep from losing his place while scanning the dense tree cover.

His attention was caught by a narrow crease in the ocean of leaves and he banked over for a better look. It was barely the width of two ponies but nearly a hundred feet long, showing broken branches and missing leaves. The forest had nearly covered it up, but something had come through from above and he started to dip lower to investigate.

Without warning there was suddenly a brilliant glow from beneath the leaves, coming from right below himself. He had to squint to see at all and immediately pulled up to ensure that he was safely away from the treetops. Although the light was heavily filtered by the thick branches, it still cast a brilliant glow into the sky and his night-adjusted eyes hurt to look at it. He climbed further and then turned away from the gash in the leaves to get a fix on the light - at least to get an idea what it was.

As abruptly as it began, the light vanished, and again Stratosphere was blinded - this time by lack of night vision. He circled in a tight loop until his eyes readjusted to the night, and then he looked back down again. There was no sign of anything unusual, but he'd made a fix on the source of the light.

All thoughts of his mysterious target were far from mind now, his mind was set on his mission. The glow hadn't been a fire or an explosion - thus it had to have been magic. No pony would dare cast a spell like that so close to Canterlot, where Nightmare Moon might see it. His mind raced - could this be the Queen herself? Was she signaling? Was she in trouble? Or was something else going on?

Either way, he knew that he had to investigate. He dove down, and began to pick a path for himself through the treetops. He had to slow down substantially, but he was agile and his keen vision served him well.

It took him less than a minute to force his way through, and he was able to light onto the ground.

He had come down at the edge of a very small clearing. Again he surveyed the area... nothing moved. But his ability to pick things out of the ordinary did not fail him - there had been a struggle here, very recently. The detritus of the ground was disturbed in several places, and the tracks of some large, heavy beasts retreated into the woods.

Looking further across, his breath caught. On the far edge of the clearing, nearly swallowed by the heavy woods, were a set of tumbled carved stones - the remains of a structure. He took a single step towards it, then stepped back again.

"Dude..." he muttered to himself. "It's been my week for legends. That's the Castle of the Two Sisters. It's been lost for centuries..."

He looked around again, looking for any trace of the source of the strange light. Unwittingly, his mind drifted back to his red maned quarry. He wondered whether she had made it this far, only to run into trouble and be carried off? His wings opened involuntarily as he glanced around, nervously wondering if the creatures might be back for seconds. But the pony was a unicorn, he wondered whether what he had seen was a defensive spell.

There was a sudden swirl of dust and smoke in front of him, and he stepped back, startled. To his surprise, the dust came tightly together and formed into a solid figure. He uttered a yelp of surprise, but when he recognized that Nightmare Moon herself was now standing before him, it was all he could do to bite back a scream. He jumped backwards and landed on his face, burying his muzzle in the dirt for a second time, procuring the deepest bow he could imagine.

"Y... your Majesty!" he exclaimed.

"Enough of the pleasantries," snapped Nightmare Moon.  
"Report, immediately!"

Stratosphere took a deep breath, slowly regaining his composure. "Uh, y... yes ma'am! Corporal Stratosphere reporting on reconnaissance over the Everfree Forest near Ponyville. Um, well... I don't know very much yet. I was circling the forest when I saw this wicked bright light..."

Nightmare Moon smirked knowingly. Despite having sensed magic, she couldn't resist teasing a little. "And what were you doing circling the forest, hmm?"

Corporal Stratosphere got a look of disbelief, and dared to lift his head. "Dude, ma'am! I got stoned in the forest! I was worried my friend got stoned too."

Nightmare Moon looked shocked. "You... what?!"

"A cockatrice must have got me! I ran in, and something hit me, and next thing I knew I woke up all sore, and it was like almost an hour later."

Nightmare Moon recovered some, and nodded knowingly. "Oh, a cockatrice. Of course. And then what?"

"Well, I flew up above the forest, ma'am. Then I was like circling to see if I could see... um... well, a friend of mine was in there, and I wanted to make sure she was okay. Then, like I said, I saw this wicked bright light, but no fire and it wasn't an explosion! It had to be magic... ma'am. I dove down and found a path through the treetops, and I came to where I think I saw it."

He continued after a brief pause. "I don't know what happened here, du.. ma'am. But there was a struggle. I think maybe something got her. Then I saw that..." he pointed at the ruins.

Nightmare Moon hummed, and nodded again. "I detected the spell as well," she commented at last. She looked towards the ruins, speaking absently. "It was no cockatrice," she added. "Your lover cast the spell that enchanted you. But this magic... was not hers."

"Then... what was it?"

Nightmare moon did not seem to be paying attention to him. Her eyes were scanning around the clearing, and going back to the ruins frequently. Stratosphere didn't like the way her eyes darted quicker and quicker this way and that, or the way her pupils were slowly shrinking.

"*It's hers*," she whispered, though he barely heard it, and he wasn't certain that he was even meant to.

He spoke again, his voice more strained. "Dude... er, ma'am. Who do you mean...?"

Nightmare Moon looked right at him, but her eyes were a million miles away. He wasn't even certain she saw him. "*She's in there*," she whispered, her voice shaking. "*She must be. She might even be watching now.*"

Stratosphere was shaken by Nightmare Moon's voice, but he looked towards the ruins. He dared one last attempt to understand. "Your majesty? Should we investigate the ruins?"

Nightmare Moon snapped out of her trance. "No!" she responded too quickly, but then she caught herself. "Yes," she added, "but not alone. This may be more dangerous than we anticipated."

"Return to Canterlot immediately," she ordered. Her voice was low but clear and once again full of strength. "Tell no pony but Captain Sterling Honor what I am telling you now. He will assemble a small team of his strongest unicorns and earth ponies. We will be marching on the ruins. The team will work cooperatively to implode these ruins without anything, magic or otherwise, escaping."

"Aw, dude, no pegasi?"

"Pegasi will be at a disadvantage in these trees. You will lead a team of pegasi to close the skies over Canterlot - no pony is to take flight without my personal authorization. *Anything* flying towards the castle is to be treated as hostile. Now go. Tell the Captain I will join him shortly."

Stratosphere nodded and gave a sharp salute, then started a winding path upwards through the canopy. As the thick leaves began to obscure the ground he took one last look downward, seeing Nightmare Moon staring at the ruins. As he watched, she dissolved into a thick smoke and slipped away along the ground, heading towards the edge of the woods.

Once he finally broke free of the canopy and launched himself into the sky, he considered what had happened.

*"On one hoof," he mused. "Mission accomplished! I found the Queen, and she's coming back."*

He flew on silently, his wings beating the currents and the wind in his ears, until a depressing thought crossed his mind. *"Nightmare Moon said the red-maned mare was the one who stoned me... but that can't be, can it? She must have been confused."*

He abruptly got a whole new silly grin as he remembered the conversation. *"She called her my lover. Dude, if only! Now I'll never get to meet her."*

The spires of Canterlot Castle began to rise beneath him, and he started to spiral downwards. *"All right... back to business. I need to find the Captain."*

His thoughts turned darker. *"But what could be in those ruins that would scare the Queen of Eternal Night?"*

## Chapter 12 – First Flame

Celestia woke slowly, stretching her legs out carefully, and stretching out the one wing that was not bound. Every joint still ached, but there was notable improvement now that she had finally rested. Slowly, she pushed herself to a standing position, and looked around for any sense of what time it was.

*"How does anypony maintain a schedule when it's always night?"* she wondered. It was true that she had maintained the routine herself for a thousand years, but she had had the assistance of time keepers and administrative staff. She doubted that she could have kept such a perfect schedule entirely on her own, despite how many ponies preferred to believe that she was infallible.

*"Oh, if only they knew,"* she mused, making her way to the garden for water. *"How impressed would they be to see me now?"*

She reached the garden well and called up a stream of water, filling an ancient metal bucket that she had managed to locate. Then she elegantly stretched out her body as she soaked her makeshift cloth, wringing it out and running the cool water over her body. Gently she ran the cloth along her shoulders and around her wings and washed away the dust of her nap. The water caressed her body and she closed her eyes and allowed time to escape her, simply enjoying the coolness as it washed away not only dust but worries as well. She worked diligently but without hurry, giving attention to every part of her body and slowly restoring the glow of her regal white coat. The scrap of tapestry was not as pleasant as a proper sponge, but for her first bath in a decade, she felt that it was magnificent.

When she left the garden at last she felt not only stronger but more confident, and there was purpose in her step as she returned to the library. She approached the stack of books that she had left on her main work table, and was surprised to find that one was glowing and buzzing as she approached it.

"Sunset Shimmer?" she breathed. She carefully lifted the book with her magic. She brought it closer and flipped the pages open to the first blank one. She then watched quietly as the magical words formed themselves across the page.

*"Six hours?"* she wondered. *"How oddly specific... and it must have already been at least that since I sent my message. But... at least now I know that she's all right."*

Celestia read the message again, and nodded to herself. *"It doesn't feel like a trap... but it would be wise to be prepared. I suppose the message was written while I was bathing, so I shall count on five hours."*

She made her way to her map and studied it for a few minutes. There was a set of three large ink spots moving in a slow patrol-like motion outside the castle, and she watched them for a few minutes.

*"Timberwolves,"* she decided, finally. *"But they won't patrol one area for more than half an hour or so. Nothing to worry about there."*

Timberwolves were one of the many enchanted species within the Everfree Forest. Literally formed of loose branches and leaves held together with ancient magic, a lone timberwolf was certainly cause for concern but no more serious than most wild creatures. But much like their namesakes they were cunning creatures and tended to hunt in packs, making them far more dangerous.

She was about to turn away when a new ink spot began to move towards the castle, and the three timberwolves rapidly changed their movements. Two hung back while one advanced, coming at the new dot from an oblique angle.

Celestia's breath caught in her chest. A spot that size had significant magic, and heading right for the castle, could it really just be another creature of the woods? The spot advanced steadily while the timberwolf stalked it. Before she had time to think any further the timberwolf rushed forward.

To her surprise, the ink spot vanished from the page. A thin line of ink rapidly traced upwards, and then the spot reappeared closer to the castle, right between the first two timberwolves. Both leapt forward, and seemed to merge with the first inkspot.

Celestia's heart raced. That was a teleport spell, and somepony was now in serious trouble. She summoned all her strength and blasted the wall of the library. Boulders flew as she created a hole in the ancient stone. She flung out both wings and threw herself into the air, lighting her entire body with the glow of a mini-sun. She summoned all the power that she could manage, her mane blazing into a multicolored plasma flowing behind her as she raced towards that ink spot on her map.

It took her mere seconds to reach that spot outside the ruins, and the glow from her body lit the forest as far as she could see. Two timberwolves were practically underneath her and cringed from the glow, while she saw the third approaching from across the clearing.

She frowned, levitating herself higher into the air and spreading out her wings, casting a bright beam of heat and light directly at the

approaching timberwolf. It struck him square in the face, causing a yelp of surprise and pain. He took only one more glance at the sun princess, squinting his wooden features, then turned and ran. The two underneath her watched this and after glancing at each other, turned tail and followed.

Celestia held the glow until they had vanished into the trees, and then abruptly released the magic. She fell ungracefully to the ground and winced as her injured wing bitterly complained of the abuse. But she still had to check whether she had been in time, and started to push herself back to her hooves.

As her head came around she saw a hooded pony standing before her. The cloak was ripped and revealed an amber coat underneath. Celestia settled for a sitting position and opened her muzzle to ask whether she was okay, but the other pony spoke first.

"P... P... Princess... Celestia?"

Celestia dipped her head in a slow nod, and she smiled. "You're early," she said gently. The other pony lowered her hood, revealing her crimson striped mane and a shocked expression. Celestia continued. "I've missed you, Sunset Shimmer."

Sunset Shimmer ran forward, uttering a little laugh of joy, and wrapped her hooves tight around Celestia's foreleg. Celestia responded in turn, wrapping her good wing around her former student, while Sunset cheered excitedly.

"Oh Princess! I've been so worried! I'm so relieved to see you! It's been so lo..."

Celestia hushed Sunset abruptly, and placed a wingtip over her muzzle. Her eyes went upwards, and this time they both heard the noises in the branches above.

"Somepony is coming," Celestia said quietly. "Stay low and don't move."

The two of them crouched lower, and Celestia's horn lit faintly. A cover of leaves and branches materialized above them. It wasn't a very good camouflage but Celestia was not sure that she could do any better after the exertion she had just made. "Not a sound," she warned Sunset.

After a moment, a blue pegasus dropped from the treetops, and landed quietly on the ground. Celestia was intrigued, studying the crescent moon symbol and light armor he wore, but Sunset stiffened beside her. She touched her student with a wingtip reassuringly as they watched.

He paced a little bit, and muttered to himself, but for the moment he did not seem to be aware of them. Celestia had just begun to relax

when a dense cloud formed in front of the pegasus, and then condensed into a tall black mare with a flowing mane. Her blood ran cold and she had to bite back a tiny shriek - Nightmare Moon was only forty feet away. Her camouflage would not stand to even a cursory magic scan from her sister, and in her current state, Nightmare Moon could send her right back to the sun without so much as a struggle. She felt Sunset tense even more beside her and this time Celestia didn't dare to move to reassure her.

The pegasus bowed to Nightmare Moon, and they clearly heard her interrogating him for a status. His own responses were slurred and did not carry well through the dense air of the woods, but after a few questions Nightmare Moon turned and seemed to be staring right at them. Celestia shivered, but she met her sister's gaze and looked deep into those dragon-slit eyes. She hoped against hope to see some recognition, some hint of anything that might give her the courage to cast off the illusion and reveal herself.

She saw only confusion, and then a deep growing fear. Her heart sank as Nightmare Moon turned back to the pegasus, saying something that only he could hear. Then Nightmare Moon stood up tall, and shouted "No!" She gave a series of quick orders that did not carry across the clearing, and then the pegasus saluted and flew straight back up into the treetops.

*"Please, sister..."* begged Celestia silently. *"Please see me. Please call out. Please tell me it's okay."* But Nightmare Moon only stared past her, into the ruins behind them. All at once Nightmare Moon's expression fell into a grimace of anger and she dissolved back into a cloud of smoke, which then proceeded out of the clearing.

"No," whispered Celestia, slowly letting the illusion fade from around her.

"Princess?" asked Sunset Shimmer. "Are you all right?"

"I'm afraid our reunion will have to wait, my dear student," answered Celestia softly. "I think she knows I'm here. It's not safe to stay here any longer."

Sunset's eyes widened. "But... where will we go? I just got here! And that guard, he was looking for me! I cast a spell on him earlier."

"We will worry about him later, my dear." She pushed herself to her hooves, wincing again. Her injured wing drooped at her side, and it took her a moment to stand steady on her hooves.

"I have been making plans to move anyway," she said softly. "Please, help me into the ruins. There are a few things we need to collect, and then we will be off immediately."

"Your wing," gasped Sunset, leaning her much smaller body up against Celestia's side. Although Sunset was small, Celestia was able to put some weight against her, and it helped her a great deal as they began to walk.

"My wing will be fine," she reassured Sunset. "I hurt it coming through the trees, and broke the splints when I came out to frighten off the timberwolves. We can set it again tonight, it is not too bad."

She was lying, and she could see that Sunset knew it. Even with the magical assist, forcing her wing to take her weight had probably undone all the healing that had started. But Sunset did not call her out on it. They entered the ruins and began to walk down the ancient hall towards the library. Quietly, Sunset spoke at Celestia's side.

"I'm sorry, Princess. I'm so, so sorry!"

Celestia smiled gently. "It could not be helped, my dear. Everfree Forest has always been a dangerous place - even I had to be careful when I arrived here."

"Not that!" snapped Sunset, and she took a step away from Celestia's side, turning to face her. Celestia tilted her head in surprise, and turned as well. Sunset's face was a mixture of emotions: rage, pain, regret, frustration. She stamped her hoof on the stone floor.

"For EVERYTHING!" she shouted. "I didn't study properly! I couldn't stop Nightmare Moon! I never figured out the Elements of Harmony! Princess, I failed you in the worst way!"

Celestia winced at the undertones of anguish in Sunset's voice and she stepped forward, offering her wing to caress. Sunset stepped back, and she shook her head, her eyes filling with tears.

"Princess, *I didn't trust you!* This is *ALL MY FAULT!*"

Now the tears came in earnest, and Celestia pressed in close. She wrapped her wing and a foreleg around her student and pulled Sunset tightly into her breast. "Hush," she cooed softly. "Shh, shh. It's not your fault, I promise."

"*It IS!*" sobbed Sunset, pressing her face tight into Celestia's fur. "I was so selfish!"

Celestia held her even tighter. "No, dear heart," she comforted. "No. It was not your fault. It was mine."

"No..." Sunset rolled her face against Celestia's breast. "No, it couldn't be. You trusted me!"

Celestia shushed her again, as gently as she could. "Shhh, shhh. Listen... if not for me, there would never have been a Nightmare Moon to stop. If not for me, the Elements of Harmony would never have stopped working. If not for me, you never would have had to take on an impossible task, nor bear the guilt of failure."

Celestia gently took hold of Sunset and took a single step back, tilting the unicorn's face up to look into her own eyes. Her wing caressed Sunset's cheeks and collected the tears that still flowed. "I know how much it hurts," she confided. "But it is I who owe you an apology, and not the other way around. It is my responsibility to choose the best path forward for all of us. I failed at that and forced you to try to fix it. I had no right to ask that of you, do you understand?"

Sunset sniffed and shook her head, "No... I... you see..."

Celestia continued, gently interrupting. "And now, my dearest and most faithful student, I must ask another terrible thing of you. I must ask you to put your tears and your hurt away for just a little bit longer. If you are not ready to forgive me, then you must at least trust me."

Sunset reached up with a hoof and wiped her own cheek, shaking her head slowly as she sniffled again. "I... but I failed you."

Celestia leaned down, nuzzling her own cheek against Sunset's warmly. "I failed *you*," she corrected. "But now I need your help. It is not safe for either of us to stay here. We must pack quickly and we must move before Nightmare Moon returns to the Everfree Forest. I am not strong enough to face her yet."

Sunset took several deep breaths, and nodded slowly. "Where are we going?"

Celestia gave Sunset a mischievous smile, "Canterlot."

Sunset's eyes snapped wide so quickly that all remaining tears were instantly forgotten. "*Canterlot!?*"

Celestia managed a small giggle. "They'll never look for us there."

## Chapter 13 – First Drops of the Storm

Captain Sterling Honor stood at attention at the edge of the parade square as he watched Sergeant Impulse barking orders. Before him, two dozen powerful earth ponies and another dozen unicorns were rapidly being issued equipment. Above the square a squad of pegasii raced past -- patrols of the sky were already active.

It felt good to be in action, to have something besides his own uncertainties to think about. His orders were clear enough, and he intended to be ready when the Queen returned to lead them. But for the moment he would wait for the Sergeant to do his job and get the guard organized.

He had been in his office working on paperwork when Corporal Stratosphere had knocked and requested permission to enter. The Captain had been surprised to see him again so quickly and had stood to receive the report.

*Stratosphere stood at attention and saluted, "Corporal Stratosphere reporting on reconnaissance mission, sir."*

*Sterling nodded, "Proceed, Corporal."*

*Stratosphere smiled, "I found her dud... er, sir! In the Everfree Forest!"*

*Sterling Honor blinked in surprise. "What in the hay was the Queen doing in the Everfree Forest?"*

*Stratosphere's smile faded rapidly. "Oh, um... I... I don't actually know, sir. But... something's not right." His voice lowered to a whisper. "She was seriously freaked out, dude."*

*Something about bearing that Nightmare Moon was anything but strong and in control sent a chill down Sterling's spine and he leaned in closer, his own voice dropping. "What else do you know? When is she returning to Canterlot?"*

*"Oh, she's right behind me, sir! She told me to order you to gather up your strongest earth ponies and unicorns, and prepare to march on the ruins of the old castle in the woods. She wants it destroyed."*

*Sterling smiled and relaxed, feeling a wave of relief. Whatever the problem was, there was an action plan to deal with it. "Was there anything else?"*

*Stratosphere nodded. "Yes, sir. She asked me to lead the pegasi and close the skies over Canterlot. She wants to make sure that nopony flies anywhere near the castle."*

*Sterling considered for a moment, then nodded. "Very good, Corporal. I will leave that in your hooves. You are dismissed to your duties, see to it that you are in the air before the Queen returns."*

*Stratosphere hesitated, then spoke again, quietly. "Sir," he started, pausing a moment. When he resumed, his voice was very uncertain. "Sir, she was really, really freaked out. I think whatever is in the ruins is strong enough to scare her. I just thought you should know that."*

*He saluted and left the office promptly, blasting into the air before the door had even finished closing. Sterling thought about his words carefully, then went and opened his office safe. His expression was grim as he removed an object from it and placed it securely into his saddlebag. He let his thoughts flow as he closed the safe again. "Whatever you attempted, wolf, our Queen has seen through it and she's back in control. The rest of us will give her the support she needs to finish it; don't you ever doubt it."*

He came back to the present as he caught a nod from the Sergeant and turned his attention back to the square. Three rows of his best stood at attention, their dark armor gleaming in the moonlight.

He stepped forward and Sergeant Impulse saluted sharply. He returned the salute, and the two of them began to walk the ranks, inspecting each pony with a critical eye. Professionals that they were, not a one so much as darted his or her eyes as they were inspected, staring straight ahead, and each had their equipment secured and ready to go. Sterling felt a pang of pride and he nodded as he stepped in front of the group.

"At ease!" he shouted, and the ranks immediately shifted into a more relaxed stance, moving as a single unit. Sterling smiled; these really were his best.

"Our mission today is very straight-forward," he announced. "We will be marching on the ruins of the Castle of the Two Sisters in the Everfree Forest."

This time he caught a couple of darting eyes, but otherwise not a pony moved. After a brief pause he continued. "We will be led by the Queen herself. She has ordered that we surround and destroy the ruins, and anything found inside. The unicorns will provide a magical barrier to seal the ruins, while the earth ponies will handle demolition."

"We do not know what is inside, but we must be ready for anything. You were chosen for being the strongest and the most reliable of the guards in Canterlot. You will be expected to be agile and ready to respond to anything. I shouldn't have to tell you that if Nightmare Moon orders you to do something, you will do it without hesitation and without

a word beyond 'Yes, Ma'am'. You will not speak to her unless she speaks to you first. If she does speak to you, the only thing you will say is 'Yes, Ma'am'. Is that clear?"

"Sir! Yes Sir!" shouted the group in response.

"It's a long march," he continued. "So in the interest of expediency, and not holding Her Majesty back, we will be doing it at double time. I know that none of you will embarrass me by complaining in front of the Queen."

"Sir! No Sir!"

Sterling smiled. "Good. I'm sure that after our little jog, we'll be back in time for dinner."

His next thought was interrupted as a dark cloud of smoke suddenly began to swirl and thicken in front of him. His eyes widened for just an instant and then he bowed deep, waiting. He heard Sergeant Impulse shout "Attention!" and the guard snap smartly to attention, and see the Sergeant follow up with a bow of his own.

With a snap and a blast of wind the cloud dissipated and Nightmare Moon stood before him, her flowing mane twitching as if irritated and seeming more charged than usual. "Your Majesty," greeted Sterling. "Your guard is ready to march."

Nightmare Moon looked around the square, and took a brief notice of the guard standing at attention. Sterling noted how her pupils were smaller than normal and this disquieted him, but he gave no outward indication.

"Not enough..." whispered Nightmare Moon, and she looked around again.

"Highness?" asked Sterling, uncertain if he heard correctly. "I assure you that these ponies are ready for anything."

Nightmare Moon looked uncertain, and then finally fixed Sterling Honor with a gaze. "Where is Ulfrid?"

Sterling was surprised by this question, as Stratosphere had not mentioned the wolf in his report. "I apologize, your Majesty. I have not seen him since yesterday."

Nightmare Moon frowned and then nodded. "No matter." Her voice seemed to be more present and she finally took the time to actually study the assembled guard. Sterling took note of the ones who visibly stiffened under her gaze. Finally her gaze landed on the Sergeant, and she tilted her head curiously.

"What has happened to that stallion's mane?"

Sterling had to resist the urge to chuckle and forgave Impulse's own tensing up. "In the interests of efficiency, your Highness, he has shaved it off."

"Interesting..." replied Nightmare Moon, turning her head towards the road.

"My Queen," he began. "Shall we begin the march? We should be able to cover the distance in two hours at quick march."

Nightmare Moon shook her head. "That will not be necessary," she commented. As the last word left her mouth she began to dissolve into smoke again. The smoke spread out and began to swirl around the entire group, growing denser and swirling up into a whirlwind. Sterling felt the ground pull away from his feet, and for a moment the world spun in a sickening manner.

Abruptly he landed upon the ground again, thrown off balance by the motion. He heard the crashing armor of the rest of the group landing as well and the smoke cleared, revealing a small, dark clearing in a very dense wood. Sergeant Impulse was on his hooves first, already ordering the others into position.

"All right, fillies and gentlecolts, this is what we're here for! You've had enough rest, now get to work! Unicorns, circle the ruins and lock it down NOW! Earth ponies, inside the unicorn circle, and prepare to move in! So help me, if you make the Queen wait you'll be peeling potatoes for the rest of your careers!"

The guard moved quickly and efficiently, and the glow of unicorn magic lit up one at a time around the ruins, forming a domed shield that soon encompassed it. Nightmare Moon had taken to the air a little further back, and was watching silently, though her eyes darted around frequently and her own horn glowed faintly.

Sterling caught a nod from the Sergeant and moved towards Nightmare Moon, bowing when he was nearly underneath her. "Your Highness, the guard is in position. We await your order."

Nightmare didn't even look at him at first. "Her magic is all over this clearing," she whispered. "It's everywhere. She's been watching."

"My Queen?" asked Sterling. He didn't like what he was seeing and he liked it less when her wide eyes looked down at him. It was just as Stratosphere had said: Nightmare Moon was bordering on terror.

"Take it!" she ordered, her voice unusually unsteady. "Destroy *everything*."

Sterling Honor responded without hesitation, his voice loud and commanding as he shouted across the clearing. "Proceed, Sergeant!"

Sergeant Impulse's voice rang back, strong and without hesitation. "Guard, engage!"

All at once the magical dome brightened as the earth ponies roared a charge. With powerful bucks and headbutts the outer stones began to come down, while the unicorns protected them from falling debris and scanned for any movement. Nightmare Moon's eyes locked on the ruins as they began to fall, flying closer and circling for different views.

Captain Sterling Honor drew back, seeking shelter behind a dense copse of trees. His mind raced as he opened his saddlebag and levitated out a small box.

*"I doubt that anything that would be a threat to Nightmare Moon can be handled by a dozen unicorns," he thought. "Even our guard. But there's nothing in Equestria that can stand up to TWO alicorns... especially with the guard present."*

He looked around briefly to be sure he was alone, then opened the box to look at the amulet laying inside. Propped up by plush cushions, it glowed as though the moonlight somehow reached through the trees to light it. It seemed to call out to him and he shook his head to clear the sudden cobwebs. His mind drifted back to his dream and doubt surfaced strongly. He was about to close the box when he remembered Nightmare Moon's eyes, so different from the painting in his office. Her pupils were so narrow that they could barely see and it pained him to think about it. He gritted his teeth.

*"For you, my Queen," he whispered to himself. "For Equestria and the Night Eternal."*

He lifted the amulet from its box and strapped it around his neck.

It was just like his dream: the world went nearly white around him and he felt his magic surge. He even felt it start to leak from the corners of his eyes and he felt the amulet itself burning around his neck. But it was different from his dream too – it felt *good*.

The world was in razor sharp focus, everything was lit as though under a spotlight. He could see much farther than before – he could see the earth ponies across the clearing bucking stones and taking them down – they were in the first corridor already. He could even see the unicorns on the far side of the ruins; if he focused it was like the ruins were not even in the way.

His perception of time had changed too. He watched falling rocks drop luxuriously slowly towards the ground, watched the particles of dust rising from the falling ruins. He could even see the powerful magical blast that was slowly advancing on him from the air. After a moment he realized what that meant, and stepped to the side to avoid it.

The blast struck the ground where he was standing and clods of earth and bark flew up into the air and hung there for what seemed like seconds, rotating slowly in the air before they started to come down again. And yet even in this time altered world, Nightmare Moon appeared before him with disturbing speed, hovering in front of him with her horn building up a second charge.

He dropped to a bow instantly. "Your Majesty, my apologies for startling you. I stand ready as backup, nothing more."

She stared at him for a moment longer, then her pupils widened slightly, and her horn faded. "I was not aware that you possessed such power, Captain. In that case, you and I will perform a final sweep once the guard has finished the first pass."

Sterling remained in his bow, but his heart leapt a bit at those words. "I live to serve," he replied. "It is an honor to work with Her Highness."

*"And I deserve nothing less,"* his mind added.

## Chapter 14 – Feeding the Flames

Sunset Shimmer didn't speak very much as Celestia led her deep into the ancient ruins. Her eyes kept darting to Celestia's drooping wing. The more she looked over her teacher, the more concerned she was by the cuts and scrapes that marred Celestia's coat. Although Celestia carried herself much as Sunset remembered, she could also see how tired Celestia was and how weak she had become. After scaring off the timberwolves, she'd even lost the magical flow of her multicolored mane – it had reverted to a warm pink color, as had her tail. Sunset knew a great deal about magic, and she knew that Celestia had drained herself to the point of exhaustion. Alicorn or not, she couldn't have much in reserve.

As they reached the library Sunset had to admit that she was impressed by the organization - Celestia had formed a very functional little headquarters. Sunset could clearly see where Celestia had been making plans and doing research. But Celestia didn't give her much time to look around, before they had taken five steps in her horn lit, and she levitated several books over to Sunset.

"Do you have room in your saddlebags for these?" Celestia asked. "I suppose I will need to fashion something to carry supplies with as well."

Sunset took them in her own magical field. "Let me do that, Princess. I've hardly used my magic at all today, and you should rest."

"I'm fine, really," insisted Celestia. But, she released the books and nodded. "We should take some water, as well. There is a spring in the garden room down the hall; I will show you that when we're done here."

Sunset stored the books and then began to hunt around the room while Celestia stood in place, lowering her head as she rested. After a single pass around the room gathering supplies, Sunset approached Celestia.

"Hold out your wing, Princess. I need to bind it before you injure it more than you already have."

Celestia looked a little surprised, but smiled and shook her head. "Really, dear, it's fine. We can take care of it later."

Sunset frowned "We'll be able to move faster with your wing bound, even if you won't do it for your own good. I swear I'll stand here until you let me fix it, Nightmare Moon be darned!"

Celestia chuckled softly. "For once I think I should be glad of your stubborn streak." Her horn lit and she carefully unfolded her injured wing, doing her best to hide the grimace of pain it caused.

Sunset's magic reached out, and she carefully felt along the wing, examining the injury. "I couldn't learn much new magic after..." She couldn't finish the thought. "Well, it's been hard to practice and find information about new magic. But I still found books to learn from, and I learned a bit about medicine."

Celestia nodded slowly, "You have always had a powerful thirst for knowledge. I am glad that it was not extinguished."

Sunset nodded again, satisfied at last. She levitated forward the pieces of wood and fabric that she had collected, much as Celestia had done herself only a few nights earlier. With a flash of magic the collection fashioned itself into a solid support for the wing. The new binding held the wing closer to Celestia's body, though more open. "How does that feel?"

Celestia turned her head to look over the work and nodded softly. "I daresay you did a better job than I did," she said, smiling. "It feels very secure."

Sunset nodded. "No more flying until that's healed," she ordered. Her magic flashed again, and she fashioned more fabric into a set of saddlebags and settled them across Celestia's back. They were little more than crudely fashioned sacks and Sunset blushed a little as Celestia turned her head to look at them. "Sewing and fashion I didn't study so much," she admitted.

"That's fine, dear," reassured Celestia, using her own magic to tighten the sacks. She turned towards a large map and flashed her magic at it. It glowed for a moment, and then the magic faded from the center outwards as if embers crawled across the page, leaving just the paper. "I had enchanted this map with a tracking spell," she explained. "It would not do to leave it up for others to find."

Sunset nodded and then followed Celestia out into the hall. Celestia led her quickly along the passages, finally turning into a room nearly filled with thick vegetation. Sunset could see that a path had been cut through the plants to a small hole in the center of the floor.

"Here," said Celestia. "Do you have a way to carry water?"

Sunset nodded, and removed the two canteens she had acquired in Ponyville, presenting them to the Princess. Celestia took them in her magic field and lowered them into the hole. Sunset had noticed something else while removing the canteens – the boxes from Sugar Cube Corner.

She took a quick look at them, finding them somewhat crushed, but intact. She re-stowed them for later. The cupcakes wouldn't be perfect, but now was not the time for sweets.

Celestia brought the canteens back up, and offered one to Sunset. "This will be enough for now," she commented. "It should only take four or five hours to get to Canterlot, and we can refill them once we are there. Can you think of anything else we may need?"

Sunset ran her mind down her mental checklist – both the items she already carried, and the things that Celestia had added. "No," she began slowly. "I suppose we should be fine. But Princess... are we going to walk?"

Celestia nodded. "I'm sorry, dear. I can't fly, and I don't have the magic to teleport us." She raised a hoof and interrupted Sunset before she could protest. "And you don't know where we are going. Taking the train would attract far too much attention. I'm afraid I can't think of any other alternative."

"You didn't seem well enough for a long walk earlier... what if I just winked us closer?" asked Sunset. "I'm sure I could manage most of the distance."

"I'm sorry, Sunset. It's just too risky. We could land in the middle of a patrol, or any other unexpected situation. We can't afford unnecessary risk just to save a few hours." She smiled gently. "Now that I'm back in Equestria, I can recover more quickly," she said. "Besides, it will give us time to catch up."

They made their way back to the library, and Celestia led Sunset to the posted map. "We'll start this way," indicated Celestia, drawing a glowing line to the west, away from Canterlot. "Once we're far enough out, we'll circle around and enter Canterlot from the south. That should allow us to avoid Nightmare Moon if she's returning here."

"Just one last thing to fashion," continued Celestia, approaching one of the bookcases. She withdrew a folded tapestry and levitated it over her body. With a flash of magic the cloth folded around her, forming itself into a competent cloak and hood and hiding most of her bright coat. "It wouldn't do to try to stay hidden from sight as the brightest thing in the fields," she commented with a slight tease in her voice.

"Princess?" asked Sunset Shimmer. "What about the map? And all the books you took out? What if I were to scatter some dust around to hide your tracks?"

Celestia looked around. "It would be impossible to mask all signs of my presence," she noted. "And I am quite certain that Nightmare

Moon has already sensed me, or at least my magic. No, at least we must keep traces of your magic to a minimum, so that they don't know that you are also here. If I know her as well as I think I do her first instinct will be to destroy, not to investigate."

Sunset looked up to her teacher. "How well *do* you know Nightmare Moon?" she asked uncertainly.

Celestia raised her head up, looking at the night sky beyond the library ceiling. "Like a sister," she said, very softly.

Sunset didn't notice the tear as she herself smiled widely. "So we do have a chance!"

Celestia blinked her eyes several times before she looked back down, forcing a smile. "Indeed we do," she nodded, before abruptly turning away. "But now we must make haste. We have a great distance to cover."

Sunset nodded and followed Celestia out of the library, her own expression becoming somewhat confused at Celestia's abrupt turn. The two walked quietly out of the ruins and into the forest. Sunset took one quick glance back, but Celestia never wavered. She set immediately onto the course that she had laid out in the library. Sunset flipped up her own hood, and then followed Celestia into the thick woods.

The woods did not trouble them as they advanced, and after about a half an hour of walking, Sunset spoke up again.

"Princess?"

Celestia responded without looking back. "They have started to destroy the ruins."

"Wait, what?! I didn't hear anything!"

Celestia stopped and turned around, looking back past Sunset for a moment before turning her attention down to her. "No," she replied. "The forest does not carry sound well, but I can sense it. I spent many years in that castle. Some were happy and full of hope."

Celestia turned around again, and resumed walking. "Some were not so happy. But I can sense it."

Sunset held a moment, and then trotted to catch up. "What was it like?" she asked.

Celestia did not answer for a moment, but she smiled at last. "Those were the very early days of Equestria," she began...

*In those days, Equestria had been taken over by a spirit of Chaos, whose name was Discord. He took great pleasure in disrupting the lives of the ponies who lived here and had seemingly unlimited power.*

*My sister's name was Luna; she and I found this land and witnessed the suffering of the ponies. Even as we set hoof upon the land, we felt a draw to it, and the land welcomed us. As you know, an earth pony draws strength from the ground, a pegasus from the sky, and a unicorn from her own life force. An alicorn draws from all three, but there is a special bond when an alicorn finds her place — we say that she has 'landed'. In the right place, an alicorn's strength and power is boosted as the land itself welcomes her.*

*So it was when we discovered Equestria — Equestria welcomed us, and we were landed at last. But even so, we did not have the power to defeat the spirit of Chaos. He openly mocked us, and dismissed us with a snap of his fingers. More than once, in fact.*

*With Discord in charge, life remained miserable for all the ponies of Equestria. Even if not for the pull of the land, neither Luna nor I could bear to witness this suffering. We searched far and wide for any information that we could use against him. Then it was, right in these very woods, that we discovered the Tree of Harmony. It was ancient and mysterious, and even though we did not learn whether it fed the magic of Equestria or grew from it, we knew that it was key to keeping the darkness at bay.*

*I proposed that we extract the Elements of Harmony from it, and after some initial uncertainty, Luna concurred. The sincerity of our love and the strength of our desire to help these ponies fed the elements, and they in turn magnified our power many times over.*

Sunset looked up at Celestia as they walked. She knew some of the story from legend, but she'd never heard it spoken from the source before. She was not certain whether any pony ever had.

"He laughed at us as we approached his throne yet again," Celestia recounted as she continued her story.

*"So serious," he said. But Luna and I were serious. We knew that if this failed, that we had no other recourse. We activated the Elements, feeding into them our desire to free this land, and they chose the outcome for us.*

*We felt the magic flow between us, and the Elements swirled around us. The energy built until a giant rainbow fired upwards, then arced back downwards and flooded over Discord.*

*He was still laughing as the magic turned him to solid stone. Then, just like that, it was over.*

*But it wasn't over. Equestria was still in crisis and needed serious help. Of course, Luna and I wanted to help either way, but we were overwhelmed with gratitude to be asked not only to help, but to lead. We built a small palace near the Tree of Harmony and worked very hard to restore order.*

*I've always had an affinity for the sun, and Luna for the moon. Once landed, we discovered the ability to move them. Discord had so disrupted the natural order of things that even the sunrise was no longer predictable, so Luna and I took on responsibility for raising the Sun and the Moon in an orderly fashion, every day.*

*For a while, things started to look better. Luna and I each had our duties, and between the two of us, both day and night were restored to order.*

*But then things started to go wrong... we undertook a mission to rescue the Crystal Empire, an ancient land in the Frozen North. We... failed. After that...*

Celestia went quiet for a while, as the trees thinned around them. They stepped off the road, traveling in the darker shadows. Sunset followed along quietly, waiting patiently for Celestia to continue. At last, she did.

*"After that, it seemed, Luna started to get very moody and easily upset," she sighed. "I should have expected that it would have been hard on her, but I fear that I was in denial myself."*

*When I would ask her what troubled her, she would snap at me. She began to complain that the ponies loved me more than they loved her, and then that even I didn't love her.*

Celestia's voice broke at the last, and she walked on in silence, her head bowed underneath her hood. Sunset reached up gently and touched Celestia's flank.

"I'm sorry, Princess. You don't have to continue."

"You should understand, Sunset Shimmer," replied Celestia. "There is not much more to tell you."

*Luna became very withdrawn, I would rarely see her. The moon always came up at night and she would lower it every morning to make room for the sun, but often I would not see her again for the entire day.*

*Then one day... one day she refused to lower the moon at all. At first I thought she was joking... 'ten more minutes,' I teased her. But it only made her angrier.*

*She told me that the ponies would treasure her night whether they wanted to or not. She said that she was not going to share Equestria any longer, that there was only room for one Princess. Then she cast a spell – I've never seen anything like it.*

*It was like all the darkness gathered itself to her. Her coat went black as midnight, and she grew in size. Her mane grew and swirled with a likeness of the night*

*sky, and her eyes... I will never forget her eyes. Her pupils narrowed like that of a dragon's, and she laughed the most horrible laugh as she told me that her only remaining duty was to destroy me.*

Sunset gasped softly, "Nightmare Moon is...?"

Celestia nodded, "My sister, Princess Luna. Some know this, but it is not common knowledge."

*I refused to fight her at first, and when she attacked, I fled. But she was relentless, and strike after strike came my way. Much of the damage in the ancient castle was caused during that assault. At last I turned and struck back, hoping to stun her, to make her see reason. But I couldn't do it. She overpowered me and struck me hard.*

*I was knocked from the sky and crashed into the castle, landing near the Elements. I saw no alternative... I didn't know what else to do. I was afraid that if she defeated me, that all of Equestria would fall. I was afraid that all we went through would have been for nothing, and that we unseated one dictator only to create another. You have to believe, it was the last thing I wanted to do.*

*I unlocked the Elements of Harmony, and summoned them all to myself. Pouring my love of Equestria into them, they responded to my call and activated. I flew back up into the sky and faced Nightmare Moon once again. She acted as if she didn't see the elements, and prepared another charge. I summoned up my courage and waited, begging the elements to save my sister from the darkness that had taken her.*

*When she struck at me I deployed the elements, pouring all I had into my wish that she be saved. But the elements did not grant my wish. The power of the elements easily overwhelmed Nightmare Moon's attack, and then surrounded her. She vanished before my eyes, and then there was a flash in the sky. When I looked up, I saw the Mare in the Moon appear across the surface of the moon.*

*When the spell finished, I landed and looked up at the new shadow across the surface of the moon. I stared blankly at it for a long time, only realizing with painful slowness that I had just lost my sister. I barely noticed as the elements lost their power and fell to the ground around me, so focused I was on that shadow.*

*I was devastated and it was a long time before I was all right again. But I swore that I would tell the legend my way. I studied the spell and learned that Nightmare Moon could return, given a certain alignment of magic and the stars. I created the legends and I searched over all these centuries for the pony who could help when she did return.*

"I believed that you were that pony, Sunset Shimmer," Celestia said softly. "But I did not realize the path we would have to take to realize it. Please forgive me for putting so much on your shoulders. I promise you that we will fix this together."

"I still feel that I could have done better," sighed Sunset. "I'm sorry, Princess. I'm sorry it all turned out this way."

"It's not over yet," Celestia replied softly. "There is still time for a happy ending. I have a plan. But we will need the Elements of Harmony. Do you know where they are?"

Sunset looked away, "Not... really." She sighed softly. "I thought I followed your clues properly. I found the elements in the old ruins, and I gathered them up. I even found the 'Reference Guide'. But I was never able to make them work. I eventually allowed them to scatter."

Celestia frowned in the darkness. "They require the bonds of friendship to activate," she said gently. "I should have guided you better. But we can take our time. If we can recover them, perhaps we can activate them together."

"I might know where to start," Sunset mused. "But it will probably take a long time."

Celestia nodded, "Then we will take all the time we need."

"Princess... why are we going to Canterlot?"

Celestia smiled softly. "Underneath the city is an extensive series of crystal caverns. They neatly mask magic, and are completely abandoned. Most ponies are not even aware of them, and Nightmare Moon was not present for Canterlot's construction, so she won't know about them either. We can stay there and have easy access to supplies and information."

"And then?"

"And then we will need to locate the Elements of Harmony, and use them to free Equestria yet again."

"What about your sister?" asked Sunset.

Celestia was quiet for a moment. When she replied it was very soft. "I can only hope that Nightmare Moon did not destroy her."

## Chapter 15 – Waxing Gibbous

Nightmare Moon watched the demolition with growing unease, her eyes darting about as she expected Celestia to leap from the destruction at any instant. Her magic projected a detection spell across the entire clearing, as well as some of the forest beyond, keeping track of every motion. She was tense and her magic was primed; she was ready to strike at a moment's notice.

Suddenly she detected a surge of strong magic just to the side of the clearing. She wheeled and arched her body as she channeled the charge, then threw herself into the attack as she launched a powerful blast of magical energy at the source. Without a moment's hesitation she followed the blast, winking above the source as she began to gather energy for a second attack.

It was just a unicorn standing below her, and he dropped into a bow. Sterling Honor's voice caught her off guard. "Your Majesty, my apologies for startling you. I stand ready as backup, nothing more."

Nightmare Moon stared at him. This magic was surging at a level that she'd only felt once before, long ago in the Crystal Empire...

*The Crystal Empire was a magical city in the far north of Canterlot. It was a striking city built entirely from translucent crystal that gleamed equally in both sunlight and moonlight. It was known to possess a powerful magic that stretched over all of Equestria, but it had come to light that it had been taken over by a cruel unicorn who had enslaved the citizens for his own purposes. There was no question of unseating him to free the ponies there.*

*Celestia and Luna were hovering side by side, horns glowing and stern determination on each of their faces. Before them, the dark-furred unicorn stood defiant on a balcony of black crystal. "King" Sombra, as he called himself, was a striking charcoal grey unicorn, standing half a head taller than the average pony and wearing a regal red cloak and ornate golden crown. In another world he might have been very handsome, but here his good looks were ruined by the cruel sneer on his face, the cruelly curved crimson red horn, and the magic leaking from the corners of his eyes.*

*"You fools," he told them. "Stand down. If I fall, all the Crystal Empire goes with me."*

*"No, Sombra," lectured Celestia. "Your rule is over. Step down and release the Crystal Empire. Equestria is under our protection now."*

*Luna had frowned, but as Celestia was the elder, she always led. Instead of adding her words, she strengthened her resolve and flared her horn even brighter.*

*Sombra shook his head. "Never!" he responded, his tone indicating that discussion was over. The glow around his horn intensified and he aimed at the Princesses. As a unit Celestia and Luna fired their own magic, sending a powerful combined beam racing towards the renegade King.*

*They had deliberately chosen not to use the Elements of Harmony, so as not to drain their power unnecessarily. Celestia had noted that as powerful as King Sombra was, he was just a unicorn, while Celestia and Luna were landed alicorns. The two of them had formed an attack spell intended to mirror the effects of the Elements of Harmony without needing to invoke them.*

*But it was different than with Discord. Discord had barely noticed the attack and had been turned to stone while he was still laughing at them. Sombra was different. He roared as if in pain, and his entire body glowed bright. There was a sudden blast of magic from the balcony that carried his roar outward, knocking Celestia and Luna back and off balance, and it carried to the very edges of the city.*

*As they regained their wings and got their balance again, the balcony was empty. But Luna noticed first, and cried out with horror. "Sister, look!"*

*The ponies of the city below them were frozen in their places, and worse, beginning to fade away. As the two looked on in disbelief, the buildings themselves began to follow.*

*Luna dove first, trying to scoop up a young unicorn who stood frozen at the top of a staircase. But she had become like a ghost, Luna could not touch her. So it was with another Celestia tried to rescue. The two looked around in dismay.*

*"What do we do?" asked Luna, frantically. "Do you know a spell that may help?"*

*"I... I don't know," responded Celestia. She hovered a moment in indecision before speaking again. "Try to hold them here!"*

*They flew upwards together, and focused all their will into a holding spell, hoping against hope it might buy them time. But although the magic stretched out around them, there was no apparent effect. They looked at each other frantically.*

*It was all over in just a couple of minutes and as the last structure faded away, Celestia let her magic fade. She dropped her head, closing her eyes.*

*"Sister!" cried Luna. "You must not give up! We can defeat this spell, we need only to work together!"*

*"It's too late, Luna," replied Celestia dully. "We have failed."*

*Luna flew closer to Celestia, putting her face in front of her sister's. "Then we will retrieve the Elements of Harmony and try again! We must not stop! We can still save them!"*

*Celestia looked around. Where the gleaming city once stood was now only an arctic wasteland, devoid of any sign of life. "It's over, Luna," she said. She turned abruptly, beginning to fly away. "Time to return to Canterlot."*

*Luna was incensed. She chased after her sister and looped around in front of her, blocking her path. "I will NOT give up on them!" she shouted. "Re-activate your magic NOW!"*

*Celestia narrowed her eyes. "Use your senses, Luna! Can you feel anything left? We lost. We can do no further good here!"*

*"WE MUST TRY!" shouted Luna. "I will not LET you give up!"*

*Celestia's magic flared abruptly, her mane flaring into flame, her eyes similarly displaying a fire that flared outwards. "I SAID WE'RE GOING HOME, LUNA!" she shouted, her wings spread wide. The elder alicorn dominated Luna for size, and Luna actually shrank back at the display of anger.*

*Celestia looked at her for a moment with those eyes of rage, and then her magic faded again and she only looked sad and tired. "I'm sorry, sister," she said quietly. She then wheeled hard and gave her wings several powerful flaps, retreating at speed.*

*Luna watched her until she was just a speck in the sky, then looked around the wasteland herself. Several tears wet her cheeks, and she turned for home. "I'm sorry too," she said quietly.*

Sterling Honor was still bowing before her as she came back to the present, not comforted in the least by the memory. She studied the Captain for a moment, considering his loyalty. How he gained the power could be sorted out later. If they worked together, they could finish the ruins off more thoroughly than waiting for the earth ponies to knock it down. At last she nodded.

"I was not aware that you possessed such power, Captain. In that case, you and I will perform a final sweep once the guard has finished the first pass."

He said something about being honored, but by this time she was already circling back towards the ruins. Sterling followed along, although as a unicorn he was confined to the ground. Nightmare turned her attention to the destruction, seeing that the first foyer had already been leveled. She scanned the ruins for any scan of activity, but she felt nothing and circled impatiently.

"Captain Sterling Honor!" she shouted. "Do you sense anything?"

"No, your Majesty," he replied immediately. "First phase should be complete very soon."

She flew an orbit around the ruins, reaching out to sense deeply. There were faint traces of the ancient magic that once filled these halls, but nearly drowning that out was a stronger, recent magic which was localized to just a few areas. She knew it well and there was no mistaking it now – Celestia had been here. But with no response to so much destruction, she must have left already.

Nightmare was frustrated and worried... Celestia could have gone anywhere. Now she could just be waiting for the right time to strike. But if that was so, why was she waiting at all? None of it made sense.

She looked down at Sterling again. If he remained as loyal as he was... keeping him nearby would afford her some measure of protection. Certainly Ulfrid would allow no harm to come to her, either. She considered carefully... she trusted both, though Ulfrid was a mystery and Sterling clearly had some secrets as well.

Her head lifted as a shout came from the bald-maned sergeant, and Sterling called up to her. "First phase demolition is complete, your Majesty. Should we move in?"

Nightmare looked over the ruins again. The first level had been reduced to dust – she recognized the footprint of the atrium where the Elements of Harmony had once been stored. She could sense no signature of them now, however. She nodded down to Sterling. "Have the unicorns widen the field. You and I will go in and use a compression spell to flatten the tower, then pull the catacombs up. The earth ponies should draw back, we will leave a rather large pit."

Sterling communicated the orders to the Sergeant, who barked the orders in a loud, terse voice. As the ponies began to move, she circled the ruins again, casting her senses outward into the woods. She could sense nothing, but the Everfree Forest was not like the rest of Equestria and was as likely to absorb magic as respond to it. She knew that she could not reach very far.

With the orbit completed, she flew closer to Sterling Honor.

"All is ready, your Majesty. I await your command."

She merely nodded, and flared her horn. Sterling's horn likewise flared to life, and the two of them stepped under the shield to remove the rest of the ruins.

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The destruction had completed without incident, and Nightmare Moon reflected upon this as her hooves touched down upon the balcony

to her quarters. She was so tense that she literally jumped as a soft, deep voice called to her from the room.

"Do you feel better after your excursion, my Liege?"

Nightmare Moon relaxed a little, and stepped into the room with a smirk. "Ulfrid, it is not wise to startle me at this time."

The wolf was already in a deep bow as she laid eyes upon him, although he rose as she nodded to him. "My humblest apologies, Your Majesty. But what would cause such nervousness in our Princess?"

Nightmare snorted. "So it shows?" she asked.

"With apologies, my Liege, several have noticed. None who would be disloyal to you, of course."

"Of course." Nightmare snorted again and made her way to a large, royal purple cushion, where she settled herself down so that she could look out the balcony. Ulfrid approached her and sat nearby, facing her. "Indeed, there is a concern that weighs on my mind heavily," Nightmare continued.

Ulfrid nodded gently. "The return of the solar princess."

Nightmare's jaw dropped and just as quickly her anger flared. "What do you know of this?" she demanded.

Ulfrid dipped his head low and spoke in a gentle voice. "It is my duty to be aware of what transpires."

Nightmare frowned, but allowed herself to relax a little. "I suppose I should be more surprised if you did not know something that was going on. I sensed her magic at the ruins of our old castle. But she was nowhere to be found."

Ulfrid smiled softly. "I should not be too concerned, your Highness."

Nightmare frowned again. "She comes to destroy me, Ulfrid! Why should I not be concerned?"

Ulfrid bowed deeply. "You are most safe in Canterlot, with the guards amongst the skies and the troops on the ground. Of course, you also have your loyal servant watching out for your best interests."

Nightmare Moon smiled gently. "Your loyalty is most appreciated, dear Ulfrid. But you will forgive me if I take some precautions into my own hooves."

She lowered her head, pointing her horn at the opening to her balcony. A stream of magic blasted out, and a moment later a protective

sphere began to take form around the tower. It spread slowly from the initially targeted point until it surrounded the entire tower, and then Nightmare allowed her horn to fade. Her head came up again, and she smiled. "That will grant me some measure of comfort. It will take strong magic to penetrate this shield and any attempt will give me fair warning."

Ulfrid smiled softly, having waited quietly during the spell. "But you will isolate yourself?"

"You may pass through the shield Ulfrid... it would amuse me to have some warning of your comings and goings for once." She laughed softly. "When things are more calm, we will revisit this."

It was quiet for a few minutes. Nightmare fretted, her gaze frequently going out the balcony towards the sky, while Ulfrid sat patiently. At last he spoke again, his voice soft.

"Do you truly believe that your sister means you harm?"

Nightmare started, and turned her gaze towards him slowly, meeting his eyes and holding them. After a long minute she looked away again, dipping her head towards the floor. "I do not know," she replied at last. "She banished me for a thousand years, and then I banished her. She has broken free of my spell, but I do not know why she did not come directly for me as I did for her." She sighed softly, looking aside a moment before looking back to Ulfrid. "I dare not take that chance. She must not reach Canterlot at any cost."

Ulfrid stood, and immediately dropped into another bow. "I am confident that all will turn out for the best, my Liege. Your creature will now see to his own part in ensuring that it is so."

Nightmare smiled gently. "Take no unnecessary risks, dear Ulfrid. Friends are in short supply these days."

Ulfrid stood and smiled warmly. "I serve," he assured her, then turned and exited the room without a further word. The door closed quietly behind him.

Nightmare sighed softly, and watched the closed door for a few moments before turning her attention back to the sky beyond her balcony. "You do, my friend, better than any I could ever have hoped to know."

## Chapter 16 – Crimson Flames

The walk took only a few hours, and although both Sunset Shimmer and Princess Celestia kept an eye on the sky, neither saw anything until they were deep in the forest south of Canterlot, drawing near the base of the great mountain range. There they observed a patrol of three pegasi racing past overhead. Although the pegasi did not seem to be trying too hard to see through the leaves, Celestia and Sunset had crouched down under their cloaks all the same.

As they continued on, eventually the trees began to thin and Sunset saw that they were drawing nearer to a sheer cliff face. Sunset scanned the sky again while Celestia examined the rock, staying back under cover of the trees as she did.

"Are we close?" asked Sunset.

Celestia nodded. "The entrance is well hidden. Given that it hasn't been used in centuries, I would be surprised if it wasn't also well buried."

"Can you open it?"

Celestia shook her head. "I won't need to. Once I find it, you can wink us both inside."

Sunset blinked. "*Me?* But, Princess, I've never been in there! And didn't you say that the crystals block magic?"

"I have confidence in you," Celestia replied, smiling. "I can give you a beacon if it would help. But even if I had the strength to take down a mountain wall, it would be much better if we left the cliff undamaged."

"What about the blocking crystals?"

Celestia hesitated. "Well... the cave once opened wide to the outside. I believe that it should be ordinary rock between us and the crystal caverns, at least where the opening was. I'm afraid it is the best that we can hope for right now."

Sunset nodded, slowly. She opened her muzzle to speak another concern, but was interrupted when Celestia's eyes brightened and she spoke again.

"Here we are!" she beamed. She turned and positioned herself facing directly towards the wall. Her horn lit and she pointed towards the rock. After a moment, a small golden star slipped free of the magical aura

and drifted towards the rock, where it slipped through the wall without disturbing a thing.

"Will that work?" asked Celestia. "The beacon is right in the middle of the entrance. If you can wink us both there, we should be fine."

"Princess... what if...?"

Princess Celestia gently hushed Sunset by placing her wingtip across Sunset's lips. "It will be *fine*," she reassured. "Trust in yourself, my dear."

Sunset held for a moment with her muzzle hanging open, and then she slowly closed it. A determined look crossed her face as she nodded once and then lit her own horn. Her opal aura reached out as she aimed towards the spot that Celestia's star had vanished. For a moment her eyes moved side to side as if she was searching, and then she smiled and locked her gaze onto a single spot.

"Found it," she said confidently. "Are you ready, Princess?"

Celestia relaxed her stance and smiled. "Go ahead, dear."

Sunset closed her eyes as her horn's glow intensified, and then with a bright flash both she and Celestia disappeared from the forest.

After a moment the ground was solid under their hooves once again. Celestia's horn was already lit with a dim light spell, so Sunset followed suit and looked around. They were in a narrow cavern, barely wide enough for the two of them to stand side by side. It appeared to be crudely carved rock and roughly ten feet behind them the cavern ended in a jumble of boulders. About the same distance ahead of them the tunnel appeared to bend around to the right.

"Well done, Sunset Shimmer," said Celestia. "Perfectly placed."

Sunset felt a little shiver down her spine as she considered what might have happened if she'd missed the beacon by even a little, but she didn't speak that thought. Instead she asked, "Princess, isn't it supposed to be crystal? This just looks like rock."

Celestia didn't reply, only smirking a little as she strode forward. She reached the bend and proceeded around it, out of sight. Sunset ran to catch up and turned the corner, suddenly finding herself confronted by thousands of bright points of light in both her own and Celestia's colors. Celestia was standing just a few paces ahead in the middle of a tremendous cavern, watching Sunset's entrance with a smile.

"Just like I remembered it," Celestia noted. "What do you think?"

"This place is *AMAZING!*" gushed Sunset Shimmer, her eyes darting back and forth. The cavern they had entered ran deep, but it seemed to be well lit by reflections of their own light spells. Every surface was highly reflective – a flat, well-polished face of incredible crystal reflecting each unicorn's point of light over and over like an infinite universe of colored stars. The ceiling was several stories above, but uneven, with tall shafts that went much higher. In some places Sunset had difficulty even estimating the height.

Sunset walked closer to one of the walls, reaching a hoof to it as her mirror image reached back. "Just... how?" she asked. "It doesn't even seem possible!"

"It's not entirely magical," confided Celestia as her reflection drew alongside Sunset's. "We discovered these caverns during the construction of Canterlot, and they were mined for the many gemstones that were found down here. But the nature of the crystal made mining difficult, and once the easy targets were found the mines were abandoned. Over the decades ponies forgot about them. We'll be very safe here."

"And they block magic?" asked Sunset, her horn brightening just a little.

Celestia nodded, seeing what she wanted to do. "Go ahead," she encouraged. "A *little* spell."

Sunset aimed her horn at the wall and fired a very faint beam towards it. It hit the crystal and bounced off at a sharp angle, reflecting again off the side wall, and then the ceiling. The beam at last struck a small pebble, causing it to spin lazily across the floor.

"*Wow*," admired Sunset. "That's amazing... I don't think I've seen anything with such reflective properties."

"It is remarkable," agreed Celestia. "Likely one of the reasons these tunnels were abandoned. Mining was far more difficult without magic."

Sunset stroked the smooth wall with a hoof. "Could we use it against Nightmare Moon?" she wondered aloud.

Celestia shook her head, turning back towards the center of the cavern. "The crystals lose many of their properties when removed from the walls. I believe it has something to do with mere volume rather than any magical properties of the walls, but either way they had very little value outside of here. Little more than shiny glass, really."

Sunset made a disappointed sound, and then trotted to catch up with Celestia. "That's too bad, having some kind of defense would be useful."

Celestia smiled wryly, "Maybe too useful to be loose upon the world... I consider it fortunate that it doesn't work. Don't worry, our plan will succeed. But first, we need to set up camp. Have you that tent you mentioned?"

Sunset nodded and lit her horn to remove her saddlebags, setting them on the floor near the center of the cavern. She opened them, and lifted the contents out, spreading them out in the air before resting them gently on the ground. Celestia watched, and a smile grew on her face.

"You *are* well prepared," she smiled. "It looks like you were going to climb a mountain."

"I almost did," chuckled Sunset. "That was my cover story when I was buying all these supplies. Oh!" She interrupted her own thought as she drew two slightly crushed boxes closer to herself. "Oh, I had almost forgotten about these..."

Celestia tilted her head as she looked over. "What have you there?"

Sunset smiled sheepishly. "Um... my birthday cupcakes," she said gently. "I thought maybe you wouldn't mind if we ate them together, since it's been so long since I've celebrated my birthday *with* anypony. Oh, and the baker in Ponyville gave me a free piece of cloud cake." She opened one of the boxes and looked inside. "It's a little smushed, maybe we'll just have the cupcakes."

"Oh!" exclaimed Celestia. "Happy Birthday to you, Sunset Shimmer! I would be pleased to celebrate with you... I would say that even though things are a little difficult, that we have much to celebrate already."

Sunset's smile grew and she nodded. "You were the best birthday present I could ever have asked for, Princess."

Celestia's smiled and dipped her head in polite appreciation, and then she raised her head again, eyeing the open box. "Er, did you say cloud cake? If... if you don't want it, it's a personal favorite of mine. 'Smushed' or not, after ten years away I would dearly love a piece."

Sunset laughed, teasing even as she floated the box towards Celestia. "Of course, Princess! Better be careful, though... if word got out, ponies might start to think that you were just like everypony else!"

Celestia took the box into her own magic and looked into it. She inhaled deeply, savoring the scent. "Mmm," she smiled. "So now you know my true weakness. This will be lovely, thank you dear."

Sunset opened the other box and looked into it, seeing the two cupcakes were pressed together, but otherwise not too badly damaged. "It looks like the cupcakes are okay. I've got one extra now." She levitated one from the box and held it before herself, smiling genuinely. "Happy birthday to me."

A third voice unexpectedly spoke up from one of the deeper tunnels. It was a deep bass that resonated in the cavern. "If I may, I would be pleased to offer my own wishes to this event?"

Celestia and Sunset both jumped at the voice and Sunset whirled around to face it. Near the edge of the cavern stood Ulfrid, his gaze polite but steady.

"You!" cried Sunset. "Oh no!" She jumped back towards Celestia and lit her horn brightly, crouching into an offensive stance as both her cupcake and her box were left to drop to the ground.

Celestia's eyes only narrowed slightly, and she spoke politely. "Good evening to you," she offered. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure?"

Sunset's voice was loud and stressed, nearly panicked. "He works for Nightmare Moon!" she shouted. But she blinked and looked back at Celestia as the Princess laid her wing gently across her back, and reduced her magic a bit.

Ulfrid bowed slightly, speaking gently. "My apologies for interrupting, and my apologies for startling you. I came to bid you welcome. My name is Ulfrid, and I serve the regent of Equestria."

"Welcome?!" accused Sunset. "Welcome to the dungeons, you mean!!!"

"Peace, Sunset Shimmer," Celestia said, her voice still gentle but firm enough to make clear that this was not open to discussion. "Thank you for your welcome, Ulfrid, and please forgive my student. She is a little unsettled from our long trip."

Sunset gasped but held her tongue as Ulfrid bowed deeper and then stood again. "Quite understandable," he noted. "But I assure you that my visit does not foretell incarceration. I only wished to ensure that you both were well."

Celestia dipped her head gently and then smiled. "Quite, thank you. We did not expect to be noticed so quickly, however. Might I ask how you found us?"

Ulfrid smiled and dipped his own head in return. "I serve," he replied simply.

Celestia blinked once and tilted her head to look at Ulfrid while Sunset looked on in disbelief. "Whom do you serve?" asked Celestia.

Ulfrid smiled warmly. "Those to whom the Oath is sworn," he replied. His attention turned to Sunset, and he addressed her directly. "Best wishes to you on the anniversary of your birth, and worry not. Nightmare Moon will not find you in this place."

"I... thank you..." replied Sunset Shimmer. "But why would you help us? I know all about you, you do everything for Nightmare Moon! Don't you know who we are?"

"Aye," replied Ulfrid. "You are the Princess of the Sun and her loyal student, who faced Nightmare Moon on the day of her triumph. But that was a long time ago, was it not?"

Celestia blinked once at the calm identification yet otherwise kept her posture. But Sunset shook her head in frustration, brightening her horn again. "That doesn't mean we can trust you! We can't let you leave and tell the guard where we are!"

Ulfrid seemed unfazed. "Captain Sterling Honor may indeed be a problem," he replied. "He has acquired the Alicorn Amulet, and taken to wearing it. But it is not through myself that he poses a threat."

"The Alicorn Amulet! It's been found? Does he mean to unseat Nightmare Moon?" asked Sunset, frowning. "Did you expect us to help stop him?"

"Nay, he is completely loyal to Her Majesty and will defend her honor at any price."

"Which may be more dangerous...." mused Celestia. "The Alicorn Amulet... I have not heard tell of this for a very long time. Do I remember correctly that it will corrupt his judgment the longer he wears it?"

"Aye... it has already started to take effect."

"But why tell us about him?" repeated Sunset. "What do you expect us to *do*?"

Ulfrid lowered his body into a deep bow. "What you will," he answered. "I mean only to provide information, not to advise how best to use it." He smiled gently and stood again, taking a few steps to where

Sunset's dropped cupcake had rolled. "By your leave, I will take this in celebration of your birthday, Sunset Shimmer, and allow you to enjoy the one as-yet untainted in its box. I must continue on my way."

Sunset frowned, now allowing some confusion to cross her features. "But *how* did you know that we were *here*?"

Ulfrid smiled to her as he lifted the cupcake from the floor between his teeth. "It is my duty to know," he replied, speaking around the pastry. He then turned, and bowed to Celestia. "By your leave, Princess?"

Sunset looked to Celestia as well, her eyes questioning.

Celestia looked at Ulfrid for a moment, a deep penetrating gaze. Then she smiled and nodded her head once. "Of course, you may leave. Thank you for the information."

Ulfrid rose and smiled, turning without a further word and exiting the cavern through the tunnel that Celestia and Sunset had entered through.

"Wait!" called Sunset. "You can't get out that way!"

Celestia offered a tiny chuckle. "He's already gone, Sunset." She settled herself down onto the floor, and lit her horn to take another look into her tiny box of cake. "That was certainly unexpected, wasn't it?"

Sunset bit her lip, and stepped closer to Celestia, her own pastry forgotten for the moment. "Princess, was it all right to let him go? Do you know who he was?"

Celestia shook her head gently and finally took a small piece of cake up for a taste. "I don't think I do know who he was... but he was not what he appeared to be. I think that even if we had tried to stop him we would not have succeeded."

Sunset bit her lip a little harder and then finally laid down next to Celestia. She summoned the box with her spare cupcake in it and held it, thinking. "Is he on our side, then?"

Celestia thought for a moment before answering. "I don't think he is... but neither is he against us. He seemed almost neutral between ourselves and Nightmare Moon."

"But he didn't seem to like the Captain of the Guard."

Celestia made a non-committed noise. "Concerned, I should think. But he was very hard to read."

Sunset rolled a small pebble across the floor with her hoof. "So what do we do now?"

Celestia smiled, "We celebrate your birthday, of course."

Sunset looked at Celestia in disbelief for a moment. "Just that?" she asked.

"Just that," confirmed Celestia with a nod. "Tomorrow is another day."

Sunset paused for a moment and then laughed. "Thank you, Princess."

This time her cupcake was delicious.

## Chapter 17 – Thunderclap

Sterling Honor trotted onto the parade square, looking over the exhausted guard who nonetheless stood at attention before him. Even the normally stalwart Sergeant Impulse was sagging some after the double-time trot back from the Everfree Forest. Sterling Honor smiled, for his part he felt fantastic. He had never felt so energetic and refreshed.

Sterling returned the Sergeant's salute and then stood before the guard, smiling broadly.

"At ease!" he commanded. Each of the ponies moved into a slightly more relaxed stance, though without the precision of their last gathering six hours earlier.

"Good work out there," he continued. "We accomplished the mission and none of you embarrassed me in front of the Queen. I know you're all tired after the long trot back, so I just wanted to take this brief opportunity to thank you for your hard work. Take a couple of hours to recover, then report to your duties. Are there any questions?"

His eyes scanned the group, but they were all trained well enough not to indicate any unhappiness on the parade square, and neither was any one so green that they would actually ask a question here. At that he smiled again.

"Very well then. Attention!"

As a unit, each pony snapped smartly to attention.

"Dis-missed!"

The guard filed off the parade square in an orderly manner, disappearing down the various streets into the city. As expected, the Sergeant remained in place beside Sterling. Sterling turned towards him. "Thank you for your work, Sergeant. You are dismissed."

"Sir," began the sergeant. "Did the Queen find what she was looking for?"

Sterling paused to consider that question. After a moment, he nodded. "I believe there was some remnant of an artifact that she wished destroyed. I'm confident that she would not have left the scene unless she was satisfied." Some part of his mind questioned why he believed that when there was no evidence of it, but it seemed an unimportant concern.

Sergeant Impulse nodded and came smartly to attention, saluting. Sterling Honor returned the salute and then Impulse turned and marched

smartly from the parade square. Sterling watched until he turned the corner, noting the way the sergeant let his exhaustion show only after he thought he was out of sight.

*"Good soldier,"* thought Sterling as he turned back towards his office. He trotted with what felt like infinite energy, quickly reaching his office and stepping smartly inside.

*"I still feel like I could sprint to the Everfree Forest and back again,"* he thought. *"This is truly remarkable."*

His eyes drifted up to the royal painting of Nightmare Moon.

*"The most important thing is that the wolf's plot is foiled. But don't you worry, Highness. I shall keep a close eye on him for you. I have the power to do so now!"*

He gazed deep into the emerald eyes of the painting, once again seeking some confirmation that he was barely even aware of. He simply let his mind go blank, reaching out towards the image.

Slowly thoughts came to him that were not his own... muted and indistinct. *"...take ... precautions into my own hooves..."*

Sterling was startled out of his trace, and turned his attention towards his door. Before he even had time to think about what he just heard, he felt a powerful surge of magic from the tower. He instantly cast his magic to fling the door open, and then winked through the doorway to a vantage point outside. Somewhere in the back of his mind he thought about how pointless opening the door was if he was only going to teleport, but his primary attention was on the Queen's tower. A large glowing sphere was being projected around the peak.

*"A shield spell? But why?"*

As the sphere completed he started to run for the tower, but paused halfway there as someone else came into view near the base. Ulfrid exited the tower and, despite the large distance, he looked directly at the Captain before he turned and walked in the opposite direction. Sterling felt a moment of confusion and a strange static in his mind as their eyes met, but it faded as Ulfrid turned away.

Sterling mused about this. *"What was that? Had the wolf seen me across such a distance? Did he want me to know that he knew I saw him?"* His eyes turned upwards, and he studied the bubble. His enhanced senses helped him to see the arcane lines that defined the shield, covered with a thin shell of magical energy that he knew would both detect and repulse.

*"Perfection," he admired. "As I would expect of her Majesty. But why would she feel the need to cast such a spell? We successfully destroyed the ruins, and surely I would have detected any artifact that we may have missed."*

His eyes came down again, and he studied the direction that Ulfrid had left. *"The shield went up as the wolf left the tower. He must have something to do with it. What was it I heard? Taking precautions into her own hooves?"*

A second voice came into his mind unbidden. *"He turns her against you. Already she doubts your ability to protect her."*

Sterling started and looked around, his eyes widening. But the voice was familiar and comforting. He looked up at the shield spell again. "Yes," he thought. *"That does make the most sense."*

He lit his horn and cast his sight out in the direction that Ulfrid had gone, but could find nothing out of the ordinary and no sign of the wolf. *"Tricky creature," he thought. "But I won't let you get away with it. Her Highness may not see through you, but I do. And I have the power now to stop any plan you come up with."*

Again his gaze went up to the tower. *"I could talk to the Queen now, while the wolf is away. Reassure her that I can manage and that he isn't needed."* All the same he hesitated, uncertain whether he should intrude. After a moment of further thought, he started trotting briskly towards the tower.

He was able to enter the tower and make his way up the winding staircase without concern, slowing only as he approached the boundaries of the glowing shield spell. From this close he could easily see the lines that defined the spell, and the small fibers of magical energy which extended from the surface to provide early detection of any intrusion attempt. He stopped short of detection and looked upwards through the translucent energy, trying to decide how he could communicate his intent without seeming like an intruder.

At last, he simply called up the remaining stairs, summoning enough volume to reach. "Your Highness!" he shouted. "It is Sterling Honor. There is a security matter I would like to discuss with you."

There was a shuffling from above and then after a moment Nightmare Moon's voice came back, just as loudly. "Can this not wait, Captain?"

Sterling grumbled to himself. *"She is already trying to push me aside. I must protect my position before it is too late to protect her."*

"It is urgent that we speak now," he shouted back up the stairs. "I respectfully request access."

There was another moment of silence, and then the sound of magic activating from above. The bottom of the sphere began to roll back upon itself, revealing an opening around the staircase.

"Come." The loud command left no uncertainty that the intrusion was not looked upon favorably, but the Captain advanced all the same. The spell closed up again behind him as he kept his attention focused and his demeanor professional.

At last he reached the top of the stairs and paused at the entrance to the room there. Nightmare Moon stood just inside the room with her wings spread and her horn glowing faintly.

"Enter, Captain," she ordered impatiently.

Captain Sterling entered the room and strongly resisted the urge to look around the Queen's private chambers. He dropped into a low bow and closed his eyes respectfully. "Your Majesty," he greeted.

"Yes, yes," grumbled Nightmare. "You said this was urgent, so get on with it."

Sterling hesitated. *"How do I address this without appearing disloyal?"* he wondered.

Again that calming, distant voice came to his mind. *"Just sow the seeds of doubt and let time nurture them. They will grow. Imply he works with outside forces."*

He rose, smiling some as his eyes opened again. He looked up at Nightmare's face and spoke directly. "I have reason to believe that there remains a threat against Canterlot, Your Highness."

Nightmare Moon rolled her eyes and smirked, folding her wings. "You are a little late in that assessment, Captain. Surely you noticed the shield."

"My apologies, Your Majesty, I did. I am not sure how to best present this information, but... forgive me for being blunt. I have reason to believe that the wolf is withholding knowledge of this threat."

Nightmare Moon snorted and turned away. "Ulfrid? Ridiculous."

"Admittedly, it is very sketchy information, and with so little to go on I would not normally trouble you. But... I must request your permission to investigate Ulfrid the wolf."

Nightmare turned her head back towards him again, her expression dismissive. "If you think you can." She managed a smirk at the end and proceeded to a small cabinet. Lighting her magic, she lifted a

small blue bottle and a crystal glass, pouring a drink. She continued as she poured. "On what grounds do you make such a request?"

Sterling dipped his head once again. "My information is very unfocused but it seems to be related to his frequent disappearances. Now, I would never go so far as to suggest that he is a threat to you, but we feel he may be sharing information with others, possibly inadvertently." He bowed once again. "I ask only to be permitted to investigate where he conducts his business."

Nightmare Moon turned back towards Sterling Honor, her face suddenly still and expressionless. She studied him for a long time, long enough that Sterling began to get nervous. Finally she spoke again.

"Captain Sterling Honor, what is the nature of the medallion that you wear around your neck? It is not a part of your guard's barding."

"*You must not reveal the truth, not at this time!*" insisted the other voice. Sterling nodded, it was very reasonable.

"It is... an heirloom, Ma'am. My great grandfather passed away recently, and he left it to me. I wear it in his memory."

Nightmare watched him a moment longer. "Is it magic?" she asked, bluntly.

"*Does she already know?*" he asked the voice silently. "*How can I cover such a story?*"

The voice was reassuring as always. "*The Alicorn Amulet can mask its signature. It is but a bauble, it tracks family members.*"

"It is but a bauble," repeated Sterling. "It tracks family members."

Nightmare studied him again. Her eyes were locked on his face, unwavering and unblinking. At last, she broke the gaze, and turned away with a sigh. "I should like to examine it at a later time," she said, taking a drink from her glass. "Your request is approved. Do not interfere with his duties and do not assign the task to any other pony."

Sterling bowed lower, and nodded. "Thank you, Ma'am. I dearly hope that I will discover nothing, and my worries will be set at ease. Is there anything else that you require of me?"

Nightmare hesitated, and then shook her head. "No. You may depart. When you have information you will report directly to me here."

Sterling nodded, rising. "Of course," he replied. Then he paused and asked one more question. "Ma'am, the shield? Should I increase security around Canterlot?"

Nightmare Moon walked back towards her balcony, and gazed out into the dark sky. "No, Captain. Maintain the air patrols, but the rest of the city remains safe. The threat exists only against myself."

Sterling was concerned, and it showed. "Did we not eliminate the threat in the Everfree Forest?"

"No, Captain, we did not."

"Then, I should assign you a guard duty!"

Nightmare Moon snorted openly and shook her head at him. "And who amongst your guard could stand against a foe that holds the power to threaten even me?"

"Then I should stay here!"

"Enough, Captain! You are dismissed!"

Nightmare Moon's horn lit bright, and before Sterling had time to realize what was happening, he was enveloped in the magical aura. The world spun around him, and a moment later he found himself standing in his office.

He took a moment to adjust to his surroundings and then began to pace. His mind whirled with the thoughts of what Nightmare Moon had said.

*"There really is a threat," he thought, "and not an object or an artifact, but a creature. One who is powerful enough to convince her to lock herself away. But what could have such power? A dragon would have to be incredibly ancient, and they've shown little interest in ending the night anyway. There are several legendary creatures powerful enough, but we have no reason to think that any are loose. What could it be?"*

He closed his eyes, concentrating. His magic reached out in tiny, fine tendrils, seeking around and beyond the city as he sought any powerful magic. But though he managed to extend his sense well beyond the castle walls, no great power came to his attention, save Nightmare Moon herself.

*"Still," he thought. "Better safe than sorry. In the morning I will have the Sergeant send a squad to check on the gates of Tartarus. Then I will find that wolf and put an end to his plans once and for all. No pony will threaten my Queen."*

There was a knock at his door. He blinked and looked over at it in surprise. "Enter," he called, turning to face it.

He was further surprised as Corporal Stratosphere entered, coming to attention and snapping an enthusiastic salute. Sterling returned the salute as the Corporal began to report.

"Corporal Stratosphere reporting, Sir! I've just finished my first shift and I thought maybe I should tell you how it went, since it was like the first shift and..." He trailed off, and stared at the Captain's neck.

"And...?" prompted Sterling, frowning just a little to remind the Corporal where he was.

Stratosphere blinked a few times, and visibly struggled for a moment. Then he stood very professionally and spoke clearly. "I'd like to give a report on my arrangements for the sky patrols. Sir!"

Sterling smiled and nodded. "A good thought, Corporal. Proceed with your report."

Stratosphere nodded and smiled, "Okay! We like, grounded the pegasi in Canterlot, but it wasn't too big a deal since most of 'em stay inside anyway. We didn't see anything weird out there, but I set up three shifts and we came up with a pattern that lets even the low flying pegasi cover the city pretty well."

Sterling nodded, "Very good. And?"

Stratosphere shuffled his forehooves. "Well, um, that's all, dude. I really need to get some sleep, I've been up for like twenty-four hours. I mean Sir. But um... I just... can I ask a question?" His eyes darted back towards the Captain's throat and then back up again.

Sterling had a pretty good idea what the question was going to be, but he nodded all the same. "If you contain your enthusiasm and remain professional, Corporal, yes, you may ask."

Stratosphere bit his lip and strained for a moment, finally asking in a forced whisper, "Dude, are you wearing the *Alicorn Amulet*??"

Sterling smiled. "No, Corporal," he replied evenly. "This is a family heirloom that I received from my great grandfather."

Stratosphere's eyes widened in surprise. "But... it looks..." He was silenced by the narrowing of the Captain's eyes, and cleared his throat. "I... okay. But I *gotta* know..." His voice dropped even lower. "*What's it like?*"

Sterling's smile grew even wider, and to his surprise he heard the other voice answering for him. "It fits very well, thank you."

## Chapter 18 - Rising Flames

Sunset woke slowly from a deep, dreamless sleep, her eyes opening to the steady darkness of the cavern. Slowly, she took in the tiny points of twinkling light echoing off the crystal walls from the small sparks of magic that she and Celestia had set up for light. Her sleeping bag was warm and comfortable despite the new fabric smell, and she considered rolling over and sleeping further.

Finally, responsibility won over and slowly, she sat up. She looked over at Celestia, who was still resting peacefully. Sunset's face crinkled into a look of concern.

*"Her wing is really hurt... but it will heal," she thought. "The real concern is her magic. I doubt she has even as much reserve as a filly right now, certainly less than I have. It will take longer for her magic to recover than her body. How long can we hide out while she recovers? Without her magic, I don't know what we can do."*

She slipped out of the sleeping bag and quietly walked across to a wall, where she stared into her dark reflection on the crystal wall. As she stared, she lifted a hoof to touch her reflection gently.

*"And they know we are here... or at least Nightmare Moon's assistant does. How can we trust him? I trust Celestia but, I'm not sure about that. If only there was a way to know. Maybe I should go check out the city... see if there is anything I can learn."*

She looked back at Celestia again, hesitating. Then she lit her horn and levitated her cape to herself, settling it over her body. *"Just a quick look... it won't take long."*

She turned and trotted deeper into the cave, in the direction she had seen Ulfrid come from. She didn't notice Celestia lifting her head behind her to watch her go.

"Don't be long," whispered Celestia to the fading light of Sunset's horn. "I can't do this alone."

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The brightly reflective walls of the cavern meant that Sunset needed only a little light to see her way ahead, and she found as the tunnel passed further into the mountain that it occasionally branched off. She chose the most upward path as often as possible, casting a small marker spell at each junction to help find her way back.

Her instincts played true. After about ten minutes she noticed a darker area ahead that did not reflect the light from her horn. As she drew

closer and the dark area grew wider, she could see the stars of the night sky beyond an opening of the cave. She chuckled to herself.

"Maybe not as mysterious as Celestia suggested," she mused.  
"That Ulfrid clearly came in here."

The crystal faded rapidly to rock as she drew closer to the opening and she released her light spell to draw nearer the exit. She crept quietly up to the opening and peered outside. At first she saw nothing, but as her eyes adjusted to the dark she made out a narrow stone ledge.

She frowned as she stepped outside. The ledge was somewhat sheltered from the night breeze, but otherwise inaccessible from below. She looked down and watched the faint candlelight of a few Canterlot homes below. She shook her head, frustrated.

"Well, we won't be getting into the city this way... I wonder if Celestia knows another way."

She looked into the sky and then gasped as she saw a streaking pegasus racing down from overhead. She quickly turned to run back into the cave.

"Wait!" shouted the Pegasus. Before she had gotten much farther a sky-blue blur had raced around her and planted itself in her path. "I can't believe you're okay!"

Sunset lit her horn and teleported past the pegasus without losing a step, only to skid to a stop when she realized what he had said. "Wait... what?"

Stratosphere blinked in surprise at the teleport flash, but turned around with a big smile when he heard Sunset's voice. "Wow, you're fast!" he chuckled. But his voice went a little softer. "Your mane is even more beautiful than I imagined."

Sunset blinked again, and reached a hoof up to her mane, grimacing as she realized that her hood wasn't up. Her head tilted and she looked at the pegasus. "*That's the night guard again... what did he...*" She found her voice again, only to repeat her confusion. "Um, what?"

Stratosphere chuckled and snapped his fore hooves to attention, then offered her a salute. "Corporal Racing Wind, ma'am. But you can just call me 'Stratosphere'. I saw you back at the Everfree Forest, and... well..." He lost some of his professionalism. "Man... I owe you my life. I just wanted to thank you! Maybe over dinner?"

Sunset's mind ran in tight circles trying to process what he was talking about. "*Wasn't this the guard I froze...? What is he talking about?*" After

a moment she repeated her thoughts vocally. "What are you talking about?"

"Dude, the cockatrice in the Everfree Forest the other night! You cast a recovery spell for me and left a note, remember?"

"Oh... I, um... yes..."

"But man, when I got further in, I found signs of a struggle... I thought you got taken by something. I was seriously bummed... it's so cool to see you're okay!"

*"Was he pursuing me even after he recovered? Why is he acting like some kind of idiot?"* Sunset frowned. "Why did you go further into the Everfree Forest even after... um... after the cockatrice?"

"Oh, I was searching for..." Stratosphere stopped abruptly. "I can't tell you that," he stated flatly. "Sorry," he added more softly.

"All right," replied Sunset slowly. "Well, I guess I better be going, then. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Stratosphere."

Stratosphere laughed. "Oh dude, *nopony* calls me 'mister'. You should just call me Stratosphere." He grinned and leaned in closer. "I mean, seriously, call me. You won't regret it!"

Sunset took a step back, and smiled nervously, "Oh, right... well, I'll certainly do that..."

"Wait!" commanded Stratosphere, his voice suddenly surprisingly powerful. Sunset froze on the spot, but Stratosphere's face melted into a goofy little smile. "You can't go until you at least tell me your name!"

Sunset frowned again, but after a moment she smiled warmly. "Sunny," she replied. "Sunny Sweetheart." She hated the name the moment she said it.

"I bet you are," smirked Stratosphere, then he returned to a more professional stance. "You may go about your business Ms. Sunny Sweetheart. Keep out of trouble now!"

"Oh, I... I will," assured Sunset.

Stratosphere saluted her again, then took wing and darted out of the cave entrance, blasting straight up into the sky the moment he was clear. Sunset immediately let out a huge breath of relief.

*"That was too dangerous... that was too close."* She turned back into the cave, looking back to ensure she wasn't being followed. After a couple of turns, just before the walls went to full crystal, she turned around and lit her horn.

*"It's not trivial to find your way in, but two ponies already know about this cave entrance. I'm just going to make sure that pegasus doesn't decide to bring me flowers..."*

Her horn brightened as her magic reached out, and a thin film of glowing plasma stretched out, filling the cave opening from floor to ceiling. As she continued to add energy to it, the glow darkened and solidified, taking on the appearance of ancient, crumbling rock. Finally satisfied, she let her horn fade.

*"That should work... it'll even feel solid to any non-magical creature, as long as they believe it's there. A pretty good job if I do say so myself!"*

She looked back down into the cave. *"I hope Princess Celestia knows another way into town, because I was never going to be able to gather supplies this way. If there are pegasi watching from the skies this intently, we need much more subtle paths."*

She made her way back down, carefully removing each magical marker as she passed it. When she reached the larger cavern, Celestia raised her head to greet her.

"Did you have a nice walk?" asked Celestia.

Although there was no hint of accusation in Celestia's voice, Sunset felt a stab in her heart at the question. She shook her head and folded her ears in shame. "I... I was seen," she said softly. "I'm sorry Princess."

Celestia's eyes widened, but her voice remained level. "Yet you return," she observed. "It must not have been so bad... may I ask who saw you?"

Sunset nodded slowly, "The same guard from the Everfree Forest... the one I froze, and the one who we saw talking to Nightmare Moon. But... he didn't seem to recognize me or know who I was. He... he just wanted to have dinner with me."

Celestia paused a moment, and then chuckled. "Perhaps we are just very lucky."

"I... I hope so, Princess. I cast a barrier spell just inside the cave mouth that looks like the rock wall; I think it will be enough to keep him from coming down here. There's no easy way for a non-pegasus to get to that opening, and I'm not sure that it's very visible even from the air."

Celestia nodded slowly, "I trust your work, dear Sunset." She looked up the tunnel that Sunset had come from for a moment, and then looked back towards her student. Her horn lit and she levitated a book

towards Sunset. "While you were gone, I retrieved this from the supplies that we brought from the library. I'd like you to take a look at it."

Sunset tilted her head and captured the floating book in her own levitation field, bringing it closer to herself. She rotated the book in front of herself, noting the clasp and crescent moon on the cover. "It's a... diary?"

Celestia nodded, "Go ahead and open it... to the FIRST page," she warned.

Sunset undid the clasp and carefully opened the book. Her eyes scanned the first page, reading the text therein.

*This book is the Property of LUNA and that means NO CELESTIA ALLOWED! I have put a spell on the book so YOU CAN'T READ IT! HAHA!*

She gasped. "Is this Princess Luna's diary?!"

Celestia chuckled softly and nodded. "It is." Her voice went more serious. "I was hoping it might cast some light on what went wrong so long ago. But," she smirks, "her warning is valid, I actually cannot read it. When I try, the words swim and I get dizzy. That prevents me from even analyzing the spell... I was hoping that you might be able to make some sense of the spell she used."

Sunset looked concerned for a moment, and then turned the page. She stared at the page for a few minutes. "I... hmm. I'm not sure. It looks like a simple spell, but... it's a little hard to track it."

Celestia leaned forwards a bit. "But you can study it without ill effect?"

Sunset flipped the page and studied the next page for a few moments, then nodded slowly. "I think so," she mused. "But it is really tangled... it will take me a while to figure it out."

Celestia smiled. "I suspected that if anypony could, it would be you."

Sunset flipped to the next page. "You can't see it, Princess?"

Celestia walked over to Sunset and peered between the covers of the book, only to wince and draw back. She shook her head, "No, dear, it is still difficult to look at."

Sunset chuckled softly. "No wonder," she offered. "The pattern changed a lot when you drew near... I think it's enchanted to react specifically to you."

Celestia chuckled herself. "That makes sense... we were both still very young. I suppose Luna did not expect any other ponies to be a threat to her journal." She smiled wryly. "I hate to intrude upon her privacy like this, but I will take any clues I can find. Do you think you can unwind the spell?"

Sunset nodded. "Yes, I think so. It will take me a little time, though."

Celestia nodded. "Wonderful, thank you. For now, however, you may put it aside. I will show you a better way into the city, and perhaps you can acquire some provisions for us?" She smiled. "Not that your dried rations don't look delicious, but I thought maybe some fresh fruit would be nice?"

"Of course, Princess." She set the book down next to her sleeping bag and collected her saddlebags. "Should I look for anything else?" she asked.

Celestia waited for Sunset to get ready, and then started along the tunnel. "Perhaps a map if you can acquire one discreetly. We can use it to plan the search for the Elements."

Sunset nodded and trotted after Celestia. They made their way along the tunnel and Celestia made each turn without hesitation, selecting several downward paths before starting upwards again. After a short time they were walking alongside a deep pit into which a set of rails formed a spiraling, descending track.

"Is this part of the mine, Princess?" Sunset wondered aloud. "It's so deep!"

Celestia barely looked as she continued along. "Yes... a very large number of gems were excavated from here. As you see, it's much more rock than crystal in this area which made for much easier digging." She was silent for a moment and then added, "I may have been too permissive in how much I allowed them to take."

"What do you mean?"

Celestia turned her head and looked down into the pit while she continued walking ahead. From here the bottom was not even visible, vanishing into the dark. "There was no need to remove so much," she replied. "I was young and desperate for approval, so I didn't want to say no. Once, these were lovely little tunnels, studded with sparkling gemstones. Now it's just a big hole in the ground."

Sunset was silent, thinking quietly, but soon Celestia stopped and pointed upwards. "There. It's a lot harder to see in the dark, but can you see the exit up there?"

Sunset squinted up into the dark, following the direction Celestia pointed, but seeing a dark hole in a dark cave was difficult for her. "Can I use some light, Princess?"

Celestia nodded, "Yes, just a little. You should see a ledge and an opening up there."

Sunset lit her horn, and a small sphere of light floated up in the direction Celestia was pointing. It drifted up over the pit, and when it drew near the far wall she started to see the detail in the rock. As it floated upwards, she finally saw the exit, alongside a narrow ledge over the pit.

"That is one of the old mine entrances," said Celestia. "As you can see, it just looks over the pit now. We used to have it blocked off for safety reasons, but younger ponies usually had some way to get in and out. If you wink over there, you should be able to slip out without attracting too much attention. I'll mark the return path for you."

Sunset nodded, and looked up at the ledge across the pit. "All right. I'll be back in an hour." Her horn lit as she concentrated for a moment, and then she winked out and re-appeared on the far ledge. She peeked outside, and then waved at Celestia before pulling up her hood and stepping out of sight.

Celestia waited for a moment, listening and reaching out her senses. When she was satisfied that Sunset was doing all right, she let down her guard. Her body sagged with exhaustion as she turned and plodded slowly back down into the caves.

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Sunset returned as promised an hour later, carefully slipping into the cavern. "Princess?" she whispered.

She listened intently, only to hear the rhythmic breathing of deep sleep. She lit her horn faintly and stepped closer, looking over her mentor. Celestia was curled up atop her sleeping bag, her head resting on her forelegs, her eyes closed and her muzzle parted gently as she rested.

"You look like you need this," she whispered softly. "Have you not slept at all since we left?"

She smiled in a motherly fashion and levitated her own sleeping bag overtop of Celestia. She then removed her saddlebags and cloak, spreading out the cloak on the floor so that she could sit on it. Finally, she captured Luna's diary and levitated it over to herself.

She opened the book and read the warning page again, spending some time considering the words that Luna had written. She finally decided that there were no secrets buried in the text there and so moved to the first page.

*"It's definitely got the feel of a younger unicorn," she mused, studying the spell carefully. "But I think it's been overlaid or enhanced by a more advanced spell. Actually, it looks like that has happened a number of times. Maybe when Princess Luna got older she decided to get more serious about protecting what she wrote...?"*

She flipped ahead through the book, taking note of how many pages appeared to at least have something on them. Her mind wandered as she flipped backwards again, leisurely turning the pages back towards the start of the book.

*"What must it have been like?" she mused, her eyes scanning distractedly. "Does this book really describe WHY Nightmare Moon did what she did? What a historical find if so!"*

Suddenly something caught her attention and she focused on the pages again. She couldn't quite decide what had brought her back into focus; it was something in the turn of the pages. She began to flip the pages back and forth more rapidly, watching the spell fold around the paper.

*"No, there's definitely something... Oh!"*

She stared at the page, and flipped back and forth again, slowly shaking her head. *"No, a Princess couldn't possibly make that mistake..."*

The longer she studied the arcane spell lines, the more convinced she became. Princess Luna had left the key to the spell right in the middle of the book with improperly sealed magical strands. If Sunset was right, she needed only to casually untangle a few of them, and the entire enchantment would fall away.

She lit her horn to try it and then looked over at Princess Celestia. *"I should wake her," she thought. "Make sure I'm doing the right thing here."*

She hesitated, watching her sleeping mentor. *"But what if I'm wrong? I don't want to let her down again."* She sighed softly and then looked back at the book. *"I'll just try it first. If I'm wrong, I can keep working. If I'm right, then I can wake her up and show her. She trusts me and I can do this."*

Her horn brightened and she reached out for the loose strands of magic that she had detected. Like undoing stitches in fabric, she carefully pulled the strands through and around the other lines of the spell. All at once, there was a flash and a puff of smoke from the book and the spell fell away, disappearing into the air.

"Yes!" cheered Sunset, then she covered her mouth, checking whether she had awakened Celestia. Celestia continued to sleep peacefully, so Sunset brought the diary closer to herself. *"Ten minutes,"* she thought. *"Yeeab, I've still got it."*

She rotated the book through the air, carefully studying it from every angle. When she was convinced there was nothing left of the spell, she opened the pages again. The book was completely readable, written in a neat, tight script in a deep blue ink. Sunset became very excited and set the book down in front of herself. All thoughts of waking Celestia were forgotten with the thrill of discovery.

"All right, Princess Luna. Let's see what you have to say."

## Chapter 19 – Full Moon

"Enough, Captain! You are dismissed!"

Sending the captain back to his office was only a brief flash of magic, but Nightmare Moon stared at the spot where he had been standing for several seconds afterwards. She was furious and mentally dared him to use his new-found powers to return.

When he didn't she stomped hard on the stone floor, spraying rock chips in every direction. She turned around and stared out over the balcony again.

*"How dare he question me? As if there is anything that could stand stronger than me! What does he think he could possibly do? If he understood the threat he would be shaking in his barding!"*

She took a deep breath and strode out onto the balcony, seeking the calming embrace of her night sky. She longed to spread her wings and soar, but she did not dare to leave her shield.

*"But he has grown in power, hasn't he? What has changed? Only that amulet... was he wearing it when he surged in the Everfree Forest? Yes, I think he must have been. What is it?"*

Her eyes scanned the skies slowly, noting the position of every star as she observed it. It was simply a focusing exercise to calm her mind and allow her to consider more deeply.

*"It is more than a bauble, that is for certain. Some form of masking was projected around it. Why would the Captain lie to me?"*

*"Ulfrid, I could use your insight now," she mused. "But the Captain attempted to cast doubt on him... is it related? He makes a point about Ulfrid disappearing for long periods, and Ulfrid is clearly not as straight forward as he appears either. But to suggest treason? No, there's no way I can accept that. Ulfrid has never shown a hint of disloyalty."*

She sighed softly and locked her eyes on the moon, which shone brightly above the castle. *"But until tonight, neither had Sterling Honor. Perhaps I should confront him directly about this..."*

She looked from the moon down into the city below her and stepped nearer to the edge of the balcony. She found herself remembering the crowd that stood beneath her in Ponyville ten years ago and a smile grew on her muzzle. *"A test, then, and this is the perfect test. He will either prove himself or hang himself and from that I can decide what to do with his concerns about Ulfrid. There's nothing so comforting as tying up loose ends, after all."*

She strode back inside and went straight to her desk. Lighting her horn, she drew forth a blank scroll and a large feather quill. Adding ink to the quill, she began to write.

*Captain Sterling Honor:*

*After your departure from my quarters, I did think of a task that I would like to entrust to you. I would like you to keep the reason for this task confidential, but you may use all means at your disposal to accomplish it.*

*As you know, ten years ago I was assaulted during the Summer Sun Celebration in Ponyville. Despite extensive searches, the unicorn responsible was never apprehended. While I do not blame you for this failure, recently information has reached me that she may again be operating in Equestria.*

*Your target is a female adult unicorn with advanced magical talent. Her last known location was Ponyville at the final Summer Sun Celebration. Her coat is...*

Nightmare Moon paused in her writing and tried to remember back. She had been caught so off guard by the magical attack that she had barely registered the unicorn who had cast it. She frowned as she strained to remember beyond the blast. Light color coat... ?

She suddenly had a flash of insight, seeing a bright amber unicorn with a crimson mane, lit by a brief flash of magic and then fading into a smoky darkness. She gasped with sudden recognition.

"Yes!" she thought. "That was her! But... what an odd way to remember her. There are too many odd feelings of late..."

She looked back outside again, her front hooves pacing the stone absently. "Sister," she thought. "What are you doing out there? If only I dared to welcome you back... anticipating your attack is nearly unbearable."

She frowned and turned again back to the paper, writing a description of the unicorn – every detail she could remember from the vision.

*She is to be considered an enemy of the crown and captured at all costs.*

Nightmare Moon re-read the last line a few times. That was too much like the old days, and her guard had enjoyed those days too much. She tapped a hoof in contemplation. "It's been ten years. She may have a life now... she may even have a family. I am not so angry as to destroy her life just so that the Captain may prove himself..."

She lifted the quill again and added: *She is to be brought directly to me unharmed. I wish to speak with her before I pass sentence. Anypony who violates this instruction will answer to me directly.*

Satisfied, she signed her name with a flourish and added the royal seal. The scroll then rolled itself up in mid-air and vanished with a puff of smoke as she sent it on its way.

"Now, Captain, show me what you are going to do..."

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Captain Sterling Honor looked up from his desk as there was a flash of light and a puff of smoke above it. A scroll tumbled from the puff of smoke and dropped onto his desk. He captured the scroll with his magic and unrolled it, then he scanned it from top to bottom, taking special note of the royal seal.

*"So," he thought, "that's what it is. An assassin from the past back to threaten her Majesty. Is this pony that powerful?"*

He looked up at the painting of Nightmare Moon on his wall, again seeking her eyes. *"We'll find her, don't you worry. But where to start? I can't just haul in every unicorn in Equestria for questioning..."*

He tapped a hoof on his desk. *"Wait... didn't Corporal Stratosphere say something about an unusual unicorn heading this way from the Frozen North?"*

He turned towards his filing shelves, and his horn lit to draw forth a small folder from it. He rifled through it briefly, then drew out a piece of paper, scanning it quickly.

*"Here we are... 'Beatrice', blue unicorn, headed for Las Pegasus... hmmm, wrong color. But, it says she had a talent for magic, she could have been in disguise. Probably not very likely that far out, but we don't know much about our quarry. Wouldn't hurt to bring her back in for a few questions."*

He put the paper back into the folder and rose from his desk, heading towards the door. He paused near the mirror and tilted his head at his reflection, using his magic to add an extra swirl to his mane and bring it down over his forehead. He smirked at the effect, and then headed out the door.

A moment later he entered Sergeant Impulse's office. The Sergeant was in the middle of enjoying a doughnut when he noticed the Captain, hurriedly dropping the doughnut and snapping to attention.

"Captain, sir! Sorry, I didn't realize you were coming, sir!"

"At ease, Sergeant!" He floated the folder over towards the Sergeant, "I need you to send a couple of guards down to Las Pegasus and pick up the unicorn in this report for questioning."

Impulse took the folder in his hooves and opened it, flipping through it slowly. Sterling winced as he noticed the powdered sugar from the doughnut getting on the papers, but he stood quietly and waited.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie?" asked Impulse, finally. "I've never even heard of her."

Sterling raised an eyebrow. "Your Corporal submitted that report less than a week ago. Didn't you read it?"

Impulse blinked and stammered. "I mean... as an act in Las Pegasus... I mean..."

"I don't care," interrupted Sterling. "Just bring her in. Don't rough her up, it's just for questioning. While you're at it, do we have any kind of registry of powerful unicorns?"

Impulse scrunched up his face in thought, "Not that I can think of... are you thinking of starting one, sir?"

Sterling shook his head, "No, I was just checking that I hadn't forgotten such a thing. It's probably a good idea, but it wouldn't help us right now."

He had a sudden thought, a memory of an institution that he himself had once attended.

"Wait," added Sterling. "See if you can find any records from Celestia's School for Talented Unicorns... I'm looking for names, talents, hometowns, descriptions of coats and cutie marks, things like that."

Impulse blinked. "But sir, that school must have closed ten years ago, back when Night fell."

"Yes, but we didn't burn it to the ground, did we? So those records must have been stored somewhere. Send somepony to enlist the help of the bureaucrats... I am pretty sure Crossed Tees was eager to help us with any issues we ran across."

"What are we looking for, sir?"

"Her Majesty has asked me to re-open the case of the unicorn who assaulted her on the night of her return to power."

"But sir, that case went cold years ago!"

"There's reason to believe that we might pick up the trail again. Now get to work!"

Impulse saluted, "Yes sir! I'll have a report to you by this evening."

Sterling Honor chuckled softly. "Good soldier," he commented, turning to leave. But he stopped once more and turned back. "One last thing," he said. "I hate to do this to him, but send somepony to wake Corporal Stratosphere and send him to my office. I need to have him perform another sweep."

Impulse nodded. "He'll be there within the hour, sir."

One hour later there was a knock on the Captain's door. He looked up from his paperwork and saw Corporal Stratosphere standing in the open door-frame, his mane a little more tousled than usual.

"Corporal Stratosphere reporting as ordered, sir." He yawned widely then added, "Man, my head just touched the pillow. What's going on, dude?"

"That's 'sir'," corrected Sterling. "Come in, Corporal."

Stratosphere yawned again as he stepped into the office, stretching out his wings as he did. "Sorry, dude... sir. I'm a little out of it."

"Well, get it together, Corporal. I need you back in the air. You've got the best eyes in the forces... I'd wager that even sleepy you see more than the average pegasus. That's exactly what I need right now."

"What's up, du... sir? Some filly get lost or something?"

"No, nothing like that. Are you familiar with the assault on Nightmare Moon ten years ago, during the announcement of her reign at the Summer Sun Celebration in Ponyville?"

Stratosphere paused. "Um... I guess so. Maybe."

Sterling frowned. "A unicorn launched an attack at the Queen and then ran. We never identified nor located her, but the Queen believes that she has returned to Equestria. She has asked us to bring her in. I think you might be able to spot her if she's anywhere near Canterlot."

"How... well... that's not much to go on, dude. It's not easy to pick out a single pony from the air, sir, even with my eyes."

"We do have a fairly good description and I think that she might stand out well enough for you to at least know when to fly down for a closer look." Sterling raised the scroll from Nightmare Moon and scanned the description. "She's a brilliant amber unicorn. Her mane is rather large and brightly striped with crimson red and bright yellow stripes. Her eyes are... Corporal, are you quite all right?"

Stratosphere's eyes had widened, his pupils shrinking as he held still. "Sir, please tell me her eyes aren't cyan."

Sterling's eyes narrowed as he scanned the scroll. "Deeply, it would seem."

Stratosphere held for a moment, then gave his wings a frustrated flap and flipped into the air. "Curse the silver moon!" he exclaimed in frustration. "I've been good, I respect the Earth, and I obey the Queen! I finally meet a gorgeous mare with a mane that won't quit, who's strong and independent and everything I hoped for... and she's an *assassin*!?"

Sterling tilted his head and fixed Stratosphere with a stern gaze. "As you were, Corporal!"

Stratosphere blinked and then quietly landed. He snapped a quick salute and then stood at ease. "Yes sir. Sorry, sir."

Sterling paused for a moment, then nodded. "What do you know, Corporal?"

Stratosphere sighed. "Her name is Sunny Sweetheart, sir. Just last night I saw her exploring the caves outside of Canterlot."

Sterling's eyes narrowed and he smiled in a disturbing way. "Show me."

## Chapter 20 – Lunar Insight

The cave was still and Celestia still rested as Sunset settled down to read Luna's diary. She smiled to herself as she turned to the first page and eagerly started reading.

*Dear Diary,*

*My name is Luna. I am a landed Alicorn in the land of Equestria. With the help of my sister Celestia and the Elements of Harmony we were able to defeat the spirit of Chaos, Discord, and free the ponies of this land. In return they have asked us to rule. As it's an honorary title, I guess that makes me Princess Luna.*

*Since this is such a major turning point in our lives, Celestia and I have decided to write diaries. We also have a shared journal that we contribute to, but there are always things that I don't want to tell my big sister - and that is what this book will be for. Besides, that other book is going to be public record someday. If I want to talk about a cute colt or complain about some administrator, it would not do to have that available for all to see!*

*So far, things have gone remarkably well, considering how bad things were. Discord was the literal embodiment of chaos... a strange creature of nearly limitless power. It seemed that his only interest was harassing the ponies of this land. Everything is disrupted – even the sun and the moon themselves. Celestia and I have taken responsibility for restoring order where our power allows it and that begins with the sun and the moon. Celestia raises the sun each morning to begin the day, and every night I raise the moon and bring out the night sky.*

*This ability was always within my reach, I suppose, but before coming here I would never have dreamt it necessary. I cannot explain the joy I feel in creating a night sky – to bring out the stars in their delicate patterns and to crown it with the gleaming silver of the moon. As the softer light falls across the fields they take on the most beautiful shades, and subtle details are revealed that are all but drowned out in the light of day.*

*Equestria is beautiful and I will never leave these lands again... I am home.*

Sunset flipped a few pages ahead, skimming descriptions of a generally busy but peaceful time, and descriptions of a very early Everfree Forest. Then she caught Celestia's name again.

*Dear Diary,*

*Today we had a meeting with a leader from the Griffin Kingdom. Celestia is SO serious about these things, she insisted that everything had to be 'just so'. She even made us speak with such a formal form of speech, all 'thou's and 'thee's. Forsooth, I*

*must takest it upon myself to be more formal in public, she sayeth. Oh well, I guess it's kind of fun in its own way. I can learn to use it when I need to appear more 'regal'.*

*Celestia and I have taken on a ritual of sorts every morning and every evening - sort of a 'changing of the guard', if you will. She lowers the sun, and then I raise the moon. In the morning, I lower the moon so that she may raise the sun. Sometimes I think she wants to turn it into some kind of formal ceremony, as if ponies would come and watch. I tease her about how formal she is becoming, and call her 'your highness'. It usually takes a few tries but I still manage to break her stoic demeanor and make her laugh.*

*The palace is nearly completed and I have to say that the ponies did a wonderful job constructing it. They even managed to dig out an intricate series of catacombs for me, as I requested. I can't wait to get down there and make them suitably creepy - if only to watch Celestia's reactions! One of the fun little perks to being Princess! It also gives us discreet access to the Tree of Harmony if we should ever need to reach it.*

Sunset mused over that for a little bit. "I would not have minded seeing what she built... it's too bad it's all gone now." She flipped ahead a few dozen pages, and leaned down to read another entry.

*Dear Diary,*

*Another beautiful night spent alone. I understand that Celestia must be awake for the daytime, but I do not understand why ALL the ponies must sleep. Surely there is call for some to stay up? But no, they lock themselves away and hide from the darkness, not venturing out again until dawn breaks.*

*I am sure they just need the opportunity to see the night's beauty, and they will love it rather than fear it. I attempted to prove this... I flew over a small village when night was at its deepest and used the Royal Canterlot Voice to call the ponies out to me. But when they came out, rather than being honored and pleased that I chose to visit them, they were confused and annoyed.*

*Celestia suggested that rather than being a surprise like that, that I should plan an event so that ponies could prepare for it and get enough sleep before it starts. I think this is a wonderful idea and I have already sent out announcements. Next week I shall raise the moon ceremoniously before all the ponies of Equestria in the first Lunar Celebration! I am so excited that I can hardly wait!*

*(And to think I was teasing Celestia about our 'changing of the guard' ceremony only a few weeks ago - now I can't wait to actually do it!)*

The next page had only a single line of text, printed in block letters rather than written.

ONLY TWELVE PONIES CAME.

Sunset looked over at where Celestia continued to sleep and wondered about waking her now. Certainly, she was getting to the part of interest. But she was comfortable and curious to read more. She flipped a few pages ahead.

*Dear Diary,*

*I'm so frustrated, and I don't know where to turn anymore. The Lunar Celebration was such a disaster and nopony seems to even care. Not only did so few show up, and that hurt, we actually received complaints about the moon rising late! Or rather, CELESTIA received complaints. They didn't even bother to address me!*

*Celestia has turned so cold since the Crystal Empire... she even told me today to 'stop whining' about the moon. She said that I didn't give proper notice for the Celebration. She also said that I should have started the ceremony earlier and that if I was really so concerned, I could just do it again.*

*Hah! As if I would set myself up like that again. No, they've had their chance. I've done everything for them! Do they really think they could have done this without me? Even the Elements of Harmony required BOTH of us to yield, and yet when ponies come it's always Celestia that they ask to see.*

*It's not even about sharing the beauty of the night anymore... they are too sun-blind to see it anyway! They treat me as a lessor pony, like I was merely Celestia's pet rather than her equal. And Celestia just eats it up, sitting tall and proud on her throne and calling those who come to visit her 'my little ponies'. Her crown must barely fit at this point!*

*I won't be pushed aside. I may be the younger sister, but I am NOT a lessor light!!*

Sunset frowned. After reading that, she now felt awkward about the concept of waking Celestia. She did not want to share the thoughts that she had just read. She turned a few pages ahead, more slowly. She stopped on a page that was written more shakily than the others.

*Dear Diary,*

*I can't stop crying... I can barely hold the quill. She's done it, she has finally done it. She's told me the truth about how she feels at last.*

*I was taking a break from the catacombs and I went upstairs to find her advisers were setting the Grand Dining Hall for a formal dinner. I knew nothing about this! So, I went to find out what was going on.*

*She was evasive at first, like she didn't want to answer, but at last she told me that representatives from Saddle Arabia were coming this very day! I was outraged! Why wasn't I informed?*

*She tried to say it was no big deal, but I pointed out we don't set the Grand Dining Hall for every two-bit little mayor who drops by for tea! Saddle Arabia! That was no hop across the stream! As a regent of Equestria, I told her, I NEEDED to be there. I couldn't believe they tried to slip it past me!*

*Celestia then told me that they'd only asked for her and to keep things simple, they had just gone with it. She thought I'd be asleep anyway, and then she accused me of spending too much time in the dark, hidden away. Suddenly it was MY fault!?*

*I exploded on her, I admit it. The Royal Canterlot Voice was a whisper compared to the shouted outrage that followed. And she was shouting right back at me, we were horn to horn and I barely even remember the words, until all at once she stopped, and she looked me in the eyes.*

*"If you're going to throw a tantrum like a baby filly, Luna, then you don't need to attend formal events. This is for royalty." She said it so calmly and clearly that I couldn't believe what I'd just heard.*

*I was still staring at her when she turned and walked away, not another word, not a glance back.*

*I'm done. That's all I can do. She thinks I'm a baby? Dignitaries don't want me at their events? I'm not royal enough for them? Fine. I'll stay down here. If they don't need me, I don't need them. I don't care if I ever see any of them ever again!*

Sunset frowned and turned the page.

*Dear Diary,*

*I've been avoiding Celestia for about a week now, and she hasn't even bothered to come looking for me. It just proves what I suspected all along. All she cares about is leading "her" little ponies.*

*No, it's not fair. Why should I have to be hidden away? I did nothing wrong. I'm every bit as regal as Celestia is and I've never tried to force my way before. But now I see that forcing your own way is what being a Princess is all about.*

*They love Celestia and the sun so very much, don't they? And Celestia loves their admiration. I have the power to take all that away from them. All I ever wanted was their respect and maybe a little gratitude. Now they will see that I am not just some child to be pushed aside. I, too, am alicorn!*

*I need to do some research, and then everypony is going to see a tantrum like they've never seen before. If there is only room for one Princess in Equestria, then I am going to take back what is rightfully mine. That Princess shall be ME!*

The words sent a chill down Sunset's spine. *"This is it,"* she thought. *"This is when Luna decided."* She turned the page.

*I've started to explore Celestia's dreams. Discreetly, so that she doesn't recognize that I'm there. I've planted images and ideas to see what affects her most. We grew up together, so I had a pretty good idea where to start. She will always overpower me, but if I can keep her on edge then I should have the advantage. I need to work some concept of dragon into it, but it seems like simpler is better. I am thinking about a dark coat to remain hidden, a hint of armor to glint reflections from the shadows where nopony should be, and a reminder that the moon will not be forgotten.*

*This is going to work.*

Sunset gasped as she turned the page again. Rather than another entry, the diary took on the look of a notebook. Lists of various species of plant and animal alike were checked off, and a crude drawing of Nightmare Moon's distinctive armor was featured at the bottom of the next page. Numerous words had been written and then scratched out, the page seemingly covered at random. Sunset turned the page again. More notes, scribbled at random angles, were interspersed with various arcane symbols - a record of magical concepts. Some took Sunset a little time to recognize, but she got most of them.

Her eyes widened at the next two pages. Written across the pages, as if they formed a single larger sheet, were spell notes. These were much more neatly written than the previous pages of notes, and in a tighter script that densely filled the pages. Sunset nearly pressed her nose against the pages as her eyes scanned across the spell again and again, her mind slowly putting the pieces together as she made sense of it.

"By Celestia's light," she whispered. "This is it! I can do this. This will fix everything!"

There was a rustling noise as Celestia began to stir, and she raised her head slowly, blinking a few times as her eyes adjusted. "Oh... Sunset Shimmer? I seem to have fallen asleep. You're back... did you have any problems?"

Sunset closed the diary and stood abruptly, and smiled back to Celestia. "Sorry to wake you, Princess. You... you looked like you needed the sleep, so I was just... working on the diary."

Celestia smiled, "Ah, and have you made any headway?"

Sunset paused and bit her lip, and then shook her head. "Nothing I can share yet," she replied. "But I'm sure I will solve everything very soon."

"I would like some water, if you don't mind?" asked Celestia. Sunset nodded and fetched a jug of water, levitating it towards Celestia.

"Princess, I think I'd like to go after the first Element of Harmony, the one that I mentioned I might know where it was? I think we might be able to use its power to... um, to help you."

Celestia tilted her head, "I don't think the Elements will work independently, dear. But if it is not too risky, we will need it anyway. Where is it located?"

"Nearby, in Neighagra Falls. I... well, I sold it to a pawn shop when I needed money and I knew a busy tourist town would be hard pressed to remember me. I convinced them that it was magical even though they couldn't prove it, and so they priced it high enough that most ponies just ignored it. I'm sure it's still there."

Celestia's eyes widened. "You *sold* an Element of Harmony?"

Sunset folded her ears and looked down. "It was a hard time, Princess, and I didn't think it worked anyway. But I can get it back. I'll just take the overnight train and be back by tomorrow."

"If it's priced so highly, how will you get it back?" asked Celestia.

Sunset grimaced and turned her head to the side. "Princess, in these times there are some questions you don't ask. But we'll make it right when this is all over."

## Chapter 21 – Maelstrom

Sterling Honor looked up from the base of the cliff as Stratosphere pointed.

"It was up there, sir. She was coming out of a cave when I saw her. I was just so glad to see her again I dove down to talk to her."

"Again', Corporal? Where did you see her before?"

"Du.. Sir. I saw her entering the Everfree Forest a few days ago... she saved me from a cockatrice"

"I don't remember seeing that in your report, Corporal."

Stratosphere rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "Yeah, um... sorry sir. I was kind of embarrassed about being caught off guard, and I figured, hey, no harm no foul, right? But I thought she got taken by the forest."

"In the future, Corporal Stratosphere, you are to include all details, including the embarrassing ones. Do you see how this might have been important?"

"Yeah... yes sir. But it still really sucks. Wait till you see her, you'll see what I mean!"

"We can't afford to let a pony's looks or personality distract us from protecting the Queen." "

"I know, I know. Canterlot comes first, sir. But it still sucks."

"Enough. Now, is there a path up there?"

"Uh, I dunno, sir. I've only seen it from the air... there's a wicked narrow ledge and the edges are pretty steep."

"Any other way in?"

"Geez... maybe. It's all part of some old mine or something, but I've never heard of anypony getting very far. The local foals might know more, it's the sorta place kids would know. But I didn't grow up here."

"Never mind then. Fly up there and look for a clear spot on the ledge. I can use your focus to follow you up there."

Stratosphere blinked. "Sir?"

Sterling smirked. "Just go, Corporal."

Stratosphere shrugged. "All right, whatever you say, sir." He gave a strong flap and rocketed upwards, quickly clearing the two hundred feet

up the side of the cliff. When he stopped and began to hover, Sterling lit his horn and focused on the airborne pegasus.

"All right, give me a landing point..." muttered Sterling as he reached out his senses. The subtle spell allowed him to redirect his sight – more by reflection than insight. At last he was able to make contact. He looked down and saw the narrow ledge beneath Stratosphere as if it were beneath himself, with the darker entrance to the cave against the wall.

"There we go," he added. After a moment's further concentration, his horn flared and he winked out of sight, only to reappear a moment later on the narrow ledge.

"Whoa!" cried a startled Stratosphere, darting back a few feet. "I wasn't expecting that, dude! You can teleport all the way up here?"

"As long as I can see it," replied Sterling, taking a look around. "I reflected my sight off your eyes. Is this the cave that you saw her at?"

Stratosphere flew in lower and landed lightly on the ledge. "Yeah d... sir. Yes sir. She came out of this cave and then went back into it."

Sterling lit his horn faintly and turned towards the cave. "Follow me, but quietly. If we see her, make no advances; just nudge me in the right direction. I should be able to capture her without any sort of trouble."

Stratosphere hesitated. "You... we aren't going to hurt her, sir?"

Sterling frowned. "That's not the intent, Corporal. We do need to question her, however. And if she *is* the assassin, then Nightmare Moon herself intends to deal with her."

Stratosphere blanched and froze. Sterling glared at him until he closed his jaw and nodded slowly. The two of them then entered the cave and moved cautiously into the shadow. They advanced to the first bend and carefully checked around the corner before they continued onward.

It wasn't much farther before Sterling's light illuminated a stone wall rounding out the back side of the cave. After a few steps he stopped, and Stratosphere came up behind him. "Aw man," said Stratosphere quietly. "It ends here? I guess she was just ditching me after all..."

Sterling didn't respond. His eyes were scanning the back wall of cave, following the curve of the wall as it wrapped around them. His head turned slowly one way, then the other as he traced out the rock. His eyes grew narrower with each pass.

"*Magic*," he muttered.

"What?" asked Stratosphere, who suddenly gasped as Sterling walked forward and passed effortlessly through the wall.

"Come along, Corporal," called Sterling from behind the wall. "It's an illusion."

Stratosphere approached the wall and tapped it dubiously with his hoof. It felt pretty solid to him.

"*Now*, Corporal!" insisted Sterling.

Stratosphere sighed softly and tapped the wall one more time before setting his hoof back on the floor. "Here goes nothing, then..."

He closed his eyes and turned his head to the side, wincing, and then strode forward. One step, two, three, four... then he opened his eyes to find that the cave tunnel had opened up before him once again. He glanced behind himself to confirm the wall was there, as it was, and then looked back to Sterling.

"*Righteous*," he whispered in awe. "*Dude, I just walked through a stone wall!*"

"*It was an illusion*," whispered Sterling. "*Which means that somepony wants to keep others out. Keep silent from here out and watch me for signals. We'll see if anypony is home.*"

Stratosphere nodded and flapped his wings once to lift his hooves off the ground. He hovered, nearly silent, and nodded again as Sterling pointed down the tunnel. Sterling set off, leading the way, and Stratosphere followed on the gentle air currents. They made their way slowly down the tunnel, pausing briefly at each junction. The captain kept his senses extended, using the subtle traces of recent magic to choose paths and reaching out in hopes of detecting anypony below.

Suddenly he felt something moving ahead and he raised a hoof to stop Stratosphere. He swung his head left to right to get a fix on the movement and then led Stratosphere into a side tunnel where they would be unseen. He indicated that somepony was approaching in the main tunnel and the two of them watched it intently.

Sunset Shimmer approached from around a corner. She was wearing her cloak but her hood was down and Stratosphere tensed noticeably as he recognized her. Sterling gritted his teeth and held still, hoping that he was far enough back in the shadows to avoid being seen too early.

Sunset stopped all the same and suddenly looked very uncertain. Her eyes narrowed slightly and she looked from side to side slowly. After a moment, her horn lit very faintly with a search spell.

Sterling realized that he couldn't wait to be detected. His own horn flared abruptly, lighting the side tunnel. Sunset's head snapped towards him but it was too late, Sterling immediately cast a binding spell which reached out and enveloped her.

Sunset cried out and her horn flared briefly, but was quickly extinguished by the Captain's own spell. She struggled physically but it was all over in the flash of a second – she was trapped. Sterling stepped out into the main tunnel.

"Relax," he advised, although his voice inspired anything but relaxation. "You are wanted for questioning, nothing more. If you have done nothing wrong, you'll be free again by tomorrow."

Sunset's eyes widened. "Questioning?" she echoed. She tried to hide the nervousness that was quickly growing in her chest. "What for?"

Stratosphere flew out of the side tunnel and landed quietly behind Sterling. "It's cool, Sunny," he said. "Nightmare Moon just wants to ask you a few questions."

Sunset's eyes widened and she attempted to force her way out of the spell again, frustrated at her inability to channel power into her horn or to make any progress against the spell's physical bonds. "I... wait... I didn't...!"

Sterling walked a little closer, and circled her slowly. "You DO match the Queen's description. Where were you during the last Summer Sun Celebration ten years ago?"

Sunset frowned and grit her teeth. "You can't be serious!" she retorted. "You're asking me about THAT?" Something caught her eye suddenly, and she stared at the Captain's throat. "Oh horseapples! Is that the Alicorn Amulet? You're the Captain of the Guard?" She looked back at Stratosphere. "You TOLD him about me?"

Stratosphere blinked. "Whoa, hold on now! If you didn't do anything, there's no reason to be keeping secrets!" He frowned, and looked down. "I'm going to be seriously bummed out if you did do something, though."

"Enough, Corporal." Sterling looked into Sunset's eyes, and nodded. "That's right," he confirmed. "I am Captain Sterling Honor, leader of the Queen's royal guard. It is my duty to take you, Sunny Sweetheart, before Her Majesty for questioning. I trust that you won't give me any difficulty. If it turns out you had anything to do with the assault on our Queen at the Summer Sun Celebration, she has advised me that she will deal with you herself." He smirked. "She was pretty annoyed by that attack."

Sunset's mind whirled as she looked back into the Captain's eyes. For a moment she was transfixed by the leaking of his boosted magic out of the outer edges of each eye, each giving off a pale crimson wave of energy which dissipated into the air. She realized that her time was short and she considered and discarded one idea after another, until the most daring plan wouldn't leave her mind.

"All right," she said, quietly. "It's Sunset, not Sunny. Sunset Shimmer."

Stratosphere frowned. "But you told me Sunny! I'd never forget *your* name..."

Sterling fixed her with a gaze. "Sunset, you say?"

Sunset nodded. "Yes, I'm the unicorn you've been looking for, and you've finally caught up with me. I'm ready to go. But before we leave... I think you should see what I have down in the main cavern. It's something that Nightmare Moon is really going to want to see."

Sterling smirked. "Do you really think I'm going to fall for that?"

Sunset would have shrugged if she could have, but her voice conveyed the intent. "You don't have to. But if you don't at least check it out, I promise you that bringing me in won't make the slightest bit of difference."

Sterling's smirk faded. "What is it?"

"I'll show you," replied Sunset. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Sterling looked down the tunnel for a moment, then back to Sunset. "You're bluffing. I don't sense anything."

"It's the crystal," replied Sunset. "It blocks and disrupts magic. You probably didn't even detect me until I was right on top of you."

Sterling looked down the tunnel again, and then straightened up. "We'll take our chances. Whatever it is can wait until we can come back. You are our primary objective." He tightened the binding spell and lifted Sunset off the ground.

"Wait!" cried Sunset. "Fine, I'll tell you! It's Princess Celestia!"

Sterling froze; even Stratosphere seemed to hang motionless for a moment. "That's impossible," offered Sterling. "The solar traitor is bound to the sun."

"She's back," insisted Sunset. "I'll show you." She sighed softly, "Maybe it will buy me some leniency if I help you."

Sterling lowered Sunset and looked into her eyes again. "I wouldn't count on it. But what are you offering?"

"Let me lead you down there. She'll have her guard down if she sees me first. You can take her to Nightmare Moon as well. The Alicorn Amulet should give you enough power, but only if you catch her unaware." She watched him carefully, thinking, "*He has to believe she's really powerful. I need him to overcompensate...*"

Sterling frowned, considering it. He heard the second voice speaking to him, "*There could be no greater proof of your loyalty than to deliver both the assassin and the solar traitor!*" He found himself nodding slowly.

"She's just been biding her time," emphasized Sunset. "Building her power. Alicorn magic is really impressive close up, and she's been preparing to take out Nightmare Moon in one strike."

Sterling frowned at Sunset's description. "A fully powered Alicorn is no joke, but she underestimates the Queen to even believe that is possible."

"Maybe," said Sunset. "But *you* are only going to have one shot at this. Once she knows you're there, even that amulet won't stand for long."

"*She underestimates the amulet,*" suggested the voice. "*But that overconfidence will only help us.*"

Sterling considered, speaking slowly. "No tricks," he said. "you clearly recognize the power that *I* wield. If you attempt to warn her, or to assist her attack, I will not hesitate to use that power against you. You will be kept under the binding spell at all times and I will give you just enough freedom to walk. Stratosphere, you will stay behind us and watch. If the prisoner moves out of line, counter immediately. We will stop out of sight of the main cavern. Understood?"

"Perfectly," replied Sunset, frowning.

"Yes sir," replied Stratosphere, spreading his wings once again.

"Then march," ordered Sterling.

Sunset felt the magical binding loosen from around her legs, but not her horn. She frowned softly. "*This had better work,*" she thought.

They were not far from the main cavern, and so after just a couple of turns Sunset stopped and pointed. Sterling made a sign for silence, and then Sunset heard the Captain's voice in her mind, "*No need to speak, we can communicate this way.*"

He scanned ahead for a moment, and then he looked back towards her. "*There's somepony in there, but I don't sense an alicorn's power.*"

Sunset's eyes widened, but she attempted to nod. She let herself think her reply. *"She's masking her power – if she didn't even these caverns wouldn't protect her from Nightmare Moon's detection – not this close! Let me go first, and I will put her off guard."*

*"Very well, but the bindings shall not be released. She will be allowed to see you, and then I will enter. You will move clear of the entrance as soon as you enter so that I have a clear line of sight."*

Sunset frowned, and then indicated acceptance. The Captain stood aside but watched her intently. After a moment, she turned and walked slowly down into the main cavern.

Princess Celestia noticed her almost immediately and lifted her head, her eyes narrowing slowly. "Back already? Is something wrong?"

Sterling tensed, reflecting his sight off Sunset's own eyes. While she didn't look as regal as he thought he remembered, the gleaming white alicorn in the center of the cavern bore a striking resemblance to the missing Princess. His jaw set as he caught a glimpse of her cutie mark – this could not be any pony besides Celestia. He began to gather power to himself as he watched Sunset step further into the cave. *"She's an alicorn... she's regent of the sun itself. I only get one shot..."*

"Hit her with everything we've got," advised the voice. Sterling smiled as he finally recognized why the voice was so familiar and comforting – it was his own voice.

He watched as Sunset moved aside as instructed and then he clearly heard her voice drift back to him...

"Sorry it has to be this way, Princess."

Celestia's jaw dropped in surprise and at the same time Sterling made his move. He channeled all the power he could muster into a stun and bind spell and then burst into the cavern. Already knowing exactly where his target was, he blasted a massive energy wave directly at Celestia. She screamed as the energy enveloped her, the power of the attack flipping her over and rolling her back across the floor, leaving her tightly entwined in thick energy locks, which wrapped around her body and cycled slowly.

Sunset winced in sympathy even as she felt the spell around her own body loosen. She glanced quickly at the Captain, who was panting with the exertion of his spell, and the lock on her own horn loosened. Sterling stepped closer to Celestia, one slow step at a time, watching intently to see if she moved. Sunset tried not to think about whether Celestia had been further injured - Sterling was distracted and Sunset knew that now it was her turn to have just one shot at success.

*"Just as I thought," she thought. "Now to see if Lun'a spell can recharge as well as power up..."*

She began to call upon a part of the spell from Luna's diary that she had memorized, feeding the arcane patterns into her horn in the precise sequence described. Her horn began to glow brightly as the spell charged. She was starting to focus her attention on her target when Stratosphere suddenly shouted from the mouth of the cave.

"Captain, watch out!"

Sterling whirled around and Sunset smirked. "That's just what I needed," she said levelly. "A clear shot." Her own horn blasted out, striking the Captain square in the throat. Sterling was instantly frozen and energy began to flow in a thin outline around his body. Sunset gritted her teeth with the effort and the flow of energy reversed itself, flowing backwards from the Captain and directly into Sunset. Her entire body began to glow a brilliant amber light, reflecting from every corner of the crystal cavern.

Stratosphere gasped and flapped his wings to propel himself in a rapid charge directly at Sunset Shimmer. "Sunny, you have to STOP!" he shouted. As he drew near, a sphere of energy flew up around Sunset and blasted him backwards, slamming him against the far wall of the cavern. He slid slowly down the wall to the floor of the cave.

Sunset ground her teeth together as the energy flow continued unabated, the aura growing around her body and flowing in a distorted wavy outline. "Too... much..." she gasped, her breathing growing more difficult. With great effort she nudged her head a few degrees to the right. "Almost..."

Celestia's eyes slowly opened a crack as she gasped a shallow breath, but they opened wider as they focused on the scene before her. "No," she whimpered, her voice barely able to rise above a whisper. "Sunset... don't!"

Sunset's horn erupted with power as she activated the final part of the spell, causing solid flares of energy to stream off in all directions and reflect off the walls of the cavern. Then she launched a narrow, focused beam directly at Celestia. A three point line of energy began flowing: starting at Sterling Honor, reflecting through Sunset, then blasting into Celestia who seemed to absorb the energy relentlessly.

Celestia's eyes flared wide and emitted a brilliant white light. She began to grow and the magical bonds around her body grew tighter until they exploded in a shower of sparks. She closed her eyes again as the spell lifted her into the air and she rolled upright. Her head came up as the

energy continued to flow directly into her breast. Her mane began to take on the flowing magical properties that she had once possessed, becoming a plasma flowing in an unseen wind as pastel colors faded into the hairs. The makeshift binding on her injured wing tore, then fell to the floor, shattered wood clattering as she flew her wings wide open, standing tall.

Sunset's own breathing became so difficult that it was all she could concentrate on; at last she collapsed to the floor with her legs spread awkwardly around her and the spell faded away. Released from the drain, Sterling Honor fell even more awkwardly, laying on his side and panting heavily.

There was complete silence for a moment, save the panting of Sterling and Sunset, but at last Sunset raised her head enough to look at Celestia. Celestia lowered herself gently to the floor as the magical glows faded. She stood tall and proud, her head up, her wings spread and her eyes closed. She was larger than she was before and, to all appearances, completely healed.

"Yes," she said, quietly.

"Princess?" Sunset asked.

Celestia's head came down slowly, and a smile grew across her muzzle. "Thank you, Sunset Shimmer," she said, her voice strong.

Sunset smiled back, but then gasped abruptly as Celestia's eyes flew open. A crimson wave of magic leaked from her eyes as her flowing mane and tail abruptly erupted into bright orange flames, dark patches forming and fading across them like flowing lava.

"You have made this so much easier," continued Celestia. She looked up and fired a powerful beam from her horn, vaporizing the crystal above her. She crouched for a moment, then gave her large wings a heavy flap and blasted through the hole, disappearing from sight.

Sunset just stared at the open hole in the crystal ceiling, as Sterling tried to get to his feet. She simply could not register what she had just seen.

## Chapter 22 – Sunspots

*Dear Diary,*

*My name is Celestia. Along with my younger sister Luna, I am the new leader of a land called Equestria. We have each been granted the title of Princess after our role in defeating the spirit of Chaos that had taken over this land.*

*We have begun a shared journal, but every pony needs a private place to share her thoughts, and so I have started this new diary for myself. It is a new record for a new life.*

*Equestria is a beautiful land with so much potential. But in studying its history, it seems that there has been a lot of strife. Its very discovery was due to conflict between the three pony tribes. Yet in the end they did come together, only to lose everything to this 'Discord'.*

*I am Alicorn and this land has welcomed my sister and myself – we are landed here. Between that and our discovery of the Elements of Harmony, which we used to overcome Discord, I know that we can protect everypony. I will spend my last breath protecting the harmony of this land and the little ponies who live here. I know that Luna will do the same.*

*Our first task is simply to restore order. Even the very sun and moon are disrupted, but Luna and I have magic enough (and coincidental affinity) to raise and lower them on a schedule. We are working on putting a functional government back in place. We will work day and night, quite literally, to put everything back in order.*

-----

*Dear Diary,*

*Things are going very well. We have a wonderful council in place, and they have arranged the construction of a beautiful palace on the edge of the Everfree Forest, just above the Tree of Harmony. It is very nearly complete and Luna and I have already moved in.*

*I have been studying the formal traditions of leadership in Equestria in hopes that we will be more readily accepted by her allies. We have already had very encouraging and productive meetings with the Griffin Kingdom and made strides towards arranging at least a meeting with the Dragons.*

*Luna thinks I am being silly in working so hard to be so formal, but we made a promise to represent these ponies. I think that we owe it to them to always appear the best that we can. She has promised to try, I can't ask for more than that.*

*At least she seems to be having fun with it. I understand she has requested a series of underground tunnels and plans to decorate them as creepy catacombs. I can only imagine! But it is good to see her smile.*

-----

*Dear Diary,*

*Luna took me on a brief tour of her catacombs today. They form an incredibly intricate and frankly rather macabre set of tunnels and traps. One corridor was even lined with torch holders shaped as disembodied hooves. Luna is so weird!*

*She also showed me a number of spells she had devised to confuse and entrap unwary visitors, but I must admit that I was rather distracted. I have been putting a great deal of thought into what we must do next to restore Equestria. We have been making great strides with Equestria's allies, but she has enemies as well. I think that we must soon make a move to show that we are serious. Something that shows we are not reliant on artifacts such as the Elements of Harmony.*

-----

*Dear Diary,*

*We have failed in the most terrible manner possible. I can hardly bear to think about it, but if I don't talk to somepony, I shall go mad. I have fought with Luna and cannot confide in her, so I must write about it here.*

*In the North of Equestria lies the Crystal Empire. It is a beacon of hope and love that shines across all of Equestria. Or at least, it used to be.*

*We received a visit from a crystal unicorn named Radiant Hope. She told us a dreadful tale of a greedy unicorn calling himself King Sombra. Using some form of dark magic, he defeated the Princess there and stole the Crystal Heart which powered their magic. He took command of the Empire and had made all the crystal ponies his slaves. Without the Crystal Heart to spread the light of the empire, his darkness was creeping across Equestria.*

*The worst part of her story, was that he had been her best friend up until that point. She begged us to help.*

*Luna and I flew there to stop him, restore the Crystal Heart and restore the magic of the Empire. But diary, I am sometimes very foolish, and this was one of those times. As King Sombra was just a unicorn, I was certain that Luna and I would both be an easy match for him. Rather than risk overuse of the Elements of Harmony, we left them behind and confronted him on our own.*

*It is true that we overpowered his magic, but he had placed a terrible curse on the land. As he faded into the exile that we created for him, the empire and all the ponies faded with him. ALL of them! We lost them ALL!*

*Luna wanted so badly to try everything to bring them back, but I knew it was too late. We could not reverse our own spell, as we had designed it such that even we could not reverse it. We had nothing to attach our magic to, no idea what kind of curse Sombra used, and no place to start. I had to leave before my heart broke in front of my sister, and I have been locked in my room since – just in case the tears fall.*

*Curse that wretched unicorn! Why didn't he step down when we offered him the chance? Why did he have to hurt so many innocent ponies? ... and why didn't I come better prepared? I was so quick to attack - why didn't I try to negotiate harder? Why couldn't I DO THE RIGHT THING?*

*How can I call myself the leader of Equestria after letting so many fall? What will happen now that we no longer have the magic of the Crystal Empire to protect this land?*

-----

*Dear Diary,*

*Luna has become rather mopey and has been acting out of character. The other night she roused an entire village from their slumber just to present herself to them – needless to say the ponies of Hoofington were not impressed. I have been getting numerous complaints about her from the citizens of Equestria and to me she is either curt or sulky.*

*It is rather frustrating. I have done my best to move on from our failures, she must learn to accept her responsibility and do the same.*

*I did manage to get one idea through to her – I suggested she turn raising the moon into a ceremony that the ponies could attend willingly. It has been too long since I have seen Luna smile, but she smiled at that suggestion.*

*I need a lot more of my sister's smile in my life.*

-----

*Dear Diary,*

*I have been having bad dreams again...*

*It has been several weeks since Luna's failed attempt at a Lunar Celebration and I am losing patience with her. All she talks about now is how the ponies hate her and love me, how she doesn't demand that much from them, and how they need to give her night a chance.*

*She looked me in the eye this evening and accused me of not loving her either, because I snapped a little bit at her. "I'm not one of your precious 'little ponies'," she said, with such bitterness that I expected venom. "So you probably don't even love me anymore – you'd rather love them."*

*I had to turn and walk away. Those words cut me deep and I just don't have the strength right now to fight with her. I was either going to bawl or say something I'd very much regret – I had to leave.*

*"Walk away," she shouted after me. "That's all you do anymore!"*

*But what else could I do?*

-----

*Dear Diary,*

*I am so angry, and so hurt, and so ashamed. I don't know what I should do.*

*I received word that a delegation from Saddle Arabia was visiting Equestria and desired an audience with me. It seems word had reached them that Equestria had new rulers and they sought to re-open old trade agreements.*

*Unfortunately, they had not been informed that Luna also ruled. I was advised that they were a strict society and expected things to be 'just so'. They would also be arriving mid-afternoon, when Luna would be sleeping, so even though I knew it was wrong of me, I agreed to meet them by myself.*

*Luna found out and we had the most dreadful row. All the stress and frustration came out – we were shouting at each other like we haven't done since we were children. She was angry at being excluded and I... I was angry that I had been caught.*

*But what I did next was unforgivable. My mind drew up all her complaints and whining, all her demands that the ponies need to love her and accusations against me; and I spoke before I even had a chance to think about it. I called her a baby filly throwing a tantrum who had no place at a royal event.*

*I walked away as quickly as I could and Luna did not call after me. I have not seen her since. I barely focused on our guests during our dinner – I hope they did not think me rude. But all I could think of was Luna's face... in that instant I realized that I had hurt her more than she could ever have hurt me, even all our fights combined. I swear I didn't mean to! But now I am afraid to face her again.*

*Why is it so hard to show a sister how much you love her? I dare not seek her out while she is still angry. But... once she is over it and she comes back up, I will apologize... I will beg for her forgiveness if I must.*

-----

*Dear Diary,*

*My sister is gone... forever. It is all my fault.*

*I am going to go cry now.*

-----

*Dear Diary,*

*It has been three weeks since I used the Elements of Harmony to banish Luna. My heart is still torn and I wonder if I should ever be whole again... but Equestria still needs me. I must try to carry on.*

*Luna used some dark magic of her own device to become 'Nightmare Moon', to face me and attempt to take control by force. This twisted distortion of my beloved sister haunts my sleep. I dream that I am in the darkest night, which no light nor magic will pierce. My voice echoes when I call out but there is no other sound. Then I hear her laugh right behind me, and I whirl around. Her eyes light up in the darkness - terrible, dragon eyes - and she steps forward and reveals herself.*

*I step back, but there is nowhere to go. I tell her, "Luna, please stop this!" But she laughs again, and tells me that she is not Luna... just as she did the night it really happened. "I'm sorry!" I tell her. "Please come back to me!"*

*"It's too late for sorry," she tells me. "You have always been too late." And I know she's right...*

*She opens her mouth and she has terrible fangs there. Then she lunges forward and I feel those fangs on my throat, piercing... I wake up. Some nights I scream. I have not feared much in life, but Nightmare Moon terrifies me.*

*I have not told anypony about these dreams.*

*I have to report that the Elements of Harmony stopped working after the spell completed... they simply dropped to the ground. This would seem to be because the bond between Luna and I was severed... which would in turn mean that she had still loved me even up until that last moment. That only makes what I did all the more reprehensible.*

*Everypony has been very supportive, but also quick to tell me that they felt I did what had to be done and that it was the only answer. It makes me angry to hear that... there was much more I could have done. I could have gone to her before she turned her heart. I could have tried harder to help integrate her. I could have loved her more. This was my failing, not hers.*

*I miss her so very much. If she were here now, I would hug her and kiss her forehead and tell her that I love her. I wouldn't stop no matter how much she protested.*

*Oh Luna. I am so very, very sorry.*

## Chapter 23 – After the Storm

There was total stillness in the crystal cavern for several minutes. Sunset stared at the newly carved hole in the ceiling with disbelief, her jaw hanging open.

Sterling Armor slowly pushed himself to a sitting position, raising a hoof to his head to ease the pounding pain. He looked around, locking his gaze on Sunset.

"Sunny... no, SunSET," he thought to himself. He pushed his hind-legs to a standing position, then sat down again, shaking his head slowly. "Sunset Shimmer," he said weakly, trying to maintain his composure. "What... what did you do?"

Sunset didn't even look down. She spoke automatically, her voice far away. "That had to be fifty meters of magic-resistant crystal... she didn't even blink."

There was a moan from near the wall as Stratosphere began to come around. "Ooh man... did anypony get the number of that airship?"

Sterling tried to collect his thoughts. *"This unicorn definitely did something... she assaulted me and, almost certainly, that was the Princess of the Sun. She aided a known enemy of the Crown."* He looked up at the ceiling, *"The Queen may be in trouble. But I feel so weak... I don't think I can teleport to the castle."*

He turned his head over towards Stratosphere and pushed himself to a standing position, speaking authoritatively. "Corporal Stratosphere! Front and center!"

Sunset snapped her attention down to the Captain as Stratosphere shook his own head, throwing himself into the air and winging his way over, landing sharply and saluting. "Yes, sir!" He wobbled a little and raised a hoof to rub at a lump on his forehead. "Oooh, man... my head..."

Sterling ignored him and looked towards Sunset, speaking sternly. "Based on what I have seen here, Sunset Shimmer, I hereby place you under arrest. You will submit yourself to the custody of myself and Corporal Stratosphere. We will escort you back to Canterlot and place you in a cell until such time as Nightmare Moon is ready to attend to you. Any attempt to escape custody will result in an escalation of your status and you will be hunted with extreme prejudice."

His eyes narrowed and he met Sunset's gaze. "Is that understood?"

Stratosphere shook his head, "Oh, Sunny. Look what you've done."

Sunset frowned and looked back up at the hole again. "I don't know what I've done..." she replied. Her attention turned back to Sterling again. "Yes... I need to go with you. I don't know what happened to Celestia, but we need to find out as quickly as possible."

Sterling frowned, "What was the spell you cast? What did you do?"

Sunset sighed softly and turned her head. "It was Nightmare Moon's transformation spell. I only needed an energy source... I was going to use the Elements of Harmony, but when I saw you wearing the Alicorn Amulet, I realized I could probably use that. Since you had found us, it was worth a try anyway..."

The blood drained out of Sterling's face, while Stratosphere's jaw dropped. Sterling spoke first, "*What* did you say the spell was?"

Sunset wouldn't look back to him. "Nightmare Moon's transformation spell," she repeated. "Or at least, the power transfer portion of it. I couldn't have managed the whole thing."

"*That... that's impossible,*" whispered Sterling. "Isn't it? How could you even know that spell?"

"Something went wrong," added Sunset. "It should only have restored her magic. I made things worse... again."

Sterling raised a hoof to his throat, and touched the unusually cool metal of the amulet there. "And you used the Alicorn Amulet to power it...?"

Sunset nodded, her ears folding to her head as she looked away from Sterling.

Sterling cursed and tore the amulet from around his throat, throwing it across the cavern. "*Damn* this amulet!"

Sunset jumped, startled by the outburst. "Are you all right?"

"It's all my fault," grumbled Sterling. "I should never have worn it; I knew it was the wrong thing to do. If I'd had it destroyed as I had first intended, the Queen wouldn't be in danger."

Sunset frowned and looked in the direction Sterling had thrown the amulet. "We might still need that," she warned. "We can analyze it once we've rested to see how it used to work."

"It's drained," explained Sterling. "I could no longer hear it nor feel its power."

"We can still analyze it," insisted Sunset. "It may be important to understanding what went wrong. We should... we should take it to Nightmare Moon. I'm in over my head."

"You can say that again," Sterling grumbled. He nodded to Stratosphere. "Corporal, retrieve the amulet and bring it back to me." When he had it back, he placed it into his saddlebag. "Where will Celestia have gone?"

Sunset shook her head. "The only place I can think of is the castle."

Sterling frowned, his mind working quickly. He made a decision and nodded quickly. "We need to reach Nightmare Moon as quickly as possible. You need to explain what you did so that we can make preparations to defend the Capital."

"Are you okay to teleport, Sir?" asked Stratosphere. "I can fly quickly, but I can't carry either of you."

Sterling shook his head. "I don't have the magic. I hate to ask this of a prisoner, but Sunset Shimmer: your cooperation will buy you a great deal of good will, possibly even your life. Will you teleport us closer to the castle?"

Sunset frowned and shook her head. "I can't either... not that far. Reflecting that much magic nearly burned me out."

Sterling stomped a hoof. "Then we are going to run. You *will* keep up," he ordered. His head flipped up towards Stratosphere. "Fly ahead, attempt to gain us access through the shield. Warn the Queen what is coming, and then report to Sergeant Impulse and have him muster the troops. We should not be too far behind."

Stratosphere saluted and was in the air in an instant, turning and dashing up the tunnel they had entered from.

"You," continued Sterling to Sunset. "Is there another exit we can use that is better suited to hoof?"

Sunset frowned, "We can't possibly beat her on the ground... even your air jockey doesn't have much chance of getting there first."

Sterling lowered his horn to her. "That isn't your concern. Is there another exit?"

Sunset considered for a moment. "There's another exit, but we'll have to wink about fifty meters across a pit. Can you manage that?"

Sterling frowned. "We're going to find out. Start moving. Double time!"

Sunset turned helplessly and started up the tunnel. Sterling followed closely, his head lowered and his horn pointing directly at her. Sunset navigated the tunnels at a brisk trot, but at last she called back over her shoulder.

"You can put that thing away," she grumbled. "I'm not going to run off."

Sterling frowned, "Just keep moving." His horn lit faintly to reinforce his point.

"You don't have much magic left," Sunset reminded him as she turned another corner. "Don't be wasting it now."

Sterling grunted, but his horn faded out. They turned a final corner and stood before the deep pit of the ancient mine. Sunset pointed across to the ledge on the far side. "We have to go there," she said. "Can you make it?"

Sterling looked across and briefly lit his horn, only to have it flicker out. He frowned anew and shook his head. "I don't think so..." He looked at the ledge, then back to Sunset.

"I have no choice," he said. "I have to trust you to take this information to Nightmare Moon without me. I will remind you that if you attempt to escape we will hunt you down with extreme prejudice."

"Oh, spare me," grumbled Sunset. "I think I can get us both across. The last thing I want to do is show up in front of Nightmare Moon without SOMEPONY to explain what I'm doing there."

Sterling smirked in spite of himself. *"She's got some spunk, I'll give her that. I bet she would have made a good officer."* He nodded.

Sunset squinted and focused her magic, her horn lighting up. It took just a moment for her to charge, and then there was a flash of light as the two of them vanished, only to reappear in another flash on the ledge across the cave. Sunset panted softly as her horn faded out.

Sterling looked back across the pit. "Good work," he noted. "Now get moving. Stratosphere must be at the castle by now. We may need to back him up."

"I don't think Celestia is going to be a threat," Sunset said, although she didn't sound very confident. "Even if she was, what are two drained unicorns and a loopy pegasus supposed to do against a fully-charged alicorn?"

"We'll have the full support of the guard by the time we get there," replied Sterling.

Sunset squeezed out of the cave exit and led Sterling through a little grove of trees. She pointed up the street. "The castle's way up there, so it's still going to be quite a run."

Sterling looked up and frowned. "The shield's down," he noted. He lowered his head and started galloping down the street, leaving Sunset caught off guard.

"Hey!" she called. "Well, wait for me! Aren't I your prisoner or something?"

She started into a hard gallop and then gathered the last of her magic to herself and used it to wink alongside Sterling. "Geez," she panted as she kept up. "Don't you ever get tired?"

"Curse that amulet! To Tartarus with the impulse that made me wear it!"

Sunset shook her head as they turned a corner and started up the steep path to the castle. "Curse these hills, you mean."

"You should report to the prison," replied Sterling without turning his head. "This is likely to be no place for a civilian."

"Hey," panted Sunset. "I'm not just any civilian, I'm public enemy number one, remember?"

They both looked up as a squad of pegasi raced towards the castle, and then the lead pony split off and banked down towards them. After a moment they both recognized Stratosphere, who glided above them as they ran.

"Sir," reported Stratosphere, "It's not good, sir!"

Sterling didn't break stride, though he lowered his head further in an effort to push on harder. "Report!" he ordered.

"There's been an attack. The tower's been damaged and Nightmare Moon is... well, sir you'll have to see for yourself. Ulfrid is with her."

"The wolf? Where was he during the attack?"

"I dunno, sir. But he told me to get the air patrols in place and the Earth ponies on guard, then come escort you the rest of the way."

"And Nightmare Moon... is she badly injured?"

Stratosphere looked confused. "She's not... well, that is, I think she's okay, dude, but... you'll just have to see. I can't explain it."

Sterling frowned. "Very well. Please escort Miss Sunset Shimmer to the prison and see that she's secured before you return to the tower."

Sunset frowned. "No way!" she shouted. "I can help fix this!"

"I think she needs to come, dude. Ulfrid said to bring her..."

"The *wolf* does not run security in this country, Corporal!"

"I know, dude... sorry, sir. But the Queen told me to set up whatever he said..."

"*I hate that wolf*," Sterling grumbled under his breath. "Very well," he added, louder. "You heard him, Ms Shimmer, faster now!" With that he increased his gallop and pulled ahead a length.

"You have GOT to be kidding me," grumbled Sunset.

They turned the last corner and barreled down the last street to the tower. Ahead of them, they saw an entire legion of pony guard blocking the road nearest the castle. As they drew nearer, they heard a gruff pony shouting, "Make way! Let the Captain through!" A narrow path between the ponies opened up.

"Thank you Sergeant," said Sterling as he raced past, nodding to acknowledge the Sergeant's salute. He entered the tower and ran up the stairs, with Sunset following close behind.

At the top of the tower he was stunned to note that the door was missing and the rock crumbled where the frame once stood. He barged into the room, but still remembered to drop into a bow as soon as he did. "Your Highness," he said. "We got here as quickly as we could."

He heard Sunset gasp behind him as she entered the room, then lifted his head as he heard the deep boom of Ulfrid's voice.

"Captain Sterling Honor, Sunset Shimmer. Thank you both for coming."

Sterling gasped himself as he looked around the room. The walls were scorched and not only the door frame, but the exit to the balcony and the windows all looked as if stone had been blown outwards. Pieces of Nightmare Moon's armor lay scattered about the room, some still smoking lightly. Ulfrid sat near one edge of the room, near a lightly

charred cushion that was once a deep royal purple. The wolf turned his head and looked down into the cushion, after a moment a deep blue alicorn sat up from it. She was slightly larger than Sterling Honor and her mane was a light azure color. Her eyes were large and uncertain but as her gaze fell upon Sunset Shimmer, they narrowed. After a moment, she climbed off the pillow, standing and showing her crescent moon cutie mark.

"We meet at last, unicorn," said Luna. "It would appear that we have much to talk about."

## Chapter 24 – Solar Flare

"Sorry it has to be this way, Princess."

Celestia's jaw dropped as Sunset uttered those words, so strange and out of context. She immediately reached out her senses to see what could be behind them, sensing the fully charged unicorn at the same time as he stepped into the cavern. She barely had time to start weaving a shield spell before his attack struck her squarely, knocking her back and sending her rolling across the floor. She felt magical bonds wrap tightly around her body and cut off connection to her own horn, draining the charge that she had begun to build. Her breath left her and she allowed darkness to take her.

When her eyes opened again, she gauged that it could only have been half a minute or so. She cast her eyes around briefly, and then snapped to full attention. Sunset was surging on some spell that connected her to the unknown unicorn and she spotted something that made her blood run cold – the spell was focused on the Alicorn Amulet strapped around the other unicorn's neck.

"No," she whimpered, dismayed at her inability to put any strength behind her words. "Sunset... don't!"

But Sunset either couldn't hear her or didn't heed the warning. Celestia's world went white as she was struck by a powerful blast of magic. Instead of pushing her back, she felt this one flood into her body and start to fill her with energy and strength. It was like when she had that first sip of water after ten years, except now she was taking in her first drink of raw magic, replenishing her long-drained stock.

She sat more upright as the flow continued and her magic reserve continued to swell, the white-hot searing of a magical surge starting to leak from her eyes. She was not sure whether she was unable or unwilling to interrupt the spell, but all concern melted away as she gave herself to it. She felt her body start to grow as the magic continued to fill her, the swelling blasting away the binding spell. She could feel her wounds close and bones knit, and she felt compelled to stand and spread her wings. All pain was gone as the fabric bindings were shredded and fell away.

She closed her eyes again as she was lifted into the air by the raw energy, and the magic filled her every muscle. She even felt her mane lift up and begin to flow once again, more magic flowing along every strand. She felt magnificent, she felt powerful, and she felt better than she had ever felt in her life. She arched her body as the flow continued into her

breast, only reluctantly taking control again when she felt it finally taper off. She gently lowered herself to the floor and stood there, her head raised as she enjoyed the feeling of being whole again – of being more than whole.

For a moment, all was quiet in the room. But a voice spoke to her in a gentle and comforting tone from somewhere deep in her mind. *"That was just what we needed, wasn't it?"*

"Yes," replied Celestia.

"Princess?" It took her a moment to realize this voice was coming from the room. She soon recognized the voice – it was her prize student, after all. Her student who had healed her and recharged her own magic faster than any of the uncertain plans she had been trying to develop herself.

Celestia smiled and lowered her head. "Thank you, Sunset Shimmer," she said warmly.

Her eyes opened and she felt this new magic surge again, flowing from her eyes and blasting through her mane and tail. It felt amazing and she marveled that she had never felt so strong before. She saw Sunset standing across the cave looking over at her with her jaw hanging open.

"You have made things so much easier," she continued. She looked up at the ceiling for a moment and gathered power to her horn. A simple discharge of the magic and she blasted a hole clear through to the outdoors. She crouched and leapt into the air, giving her wings a strong flap and blasting through to the outdoors.

The cool night air struck her and she took in a deep breath, looking around.

*"This was the only way,"* suggested the voice. *"Without the sun none of the plans to recharge our magic would have worked."*

"I know," replied Celestia. She turned her head up to the moon. "Luna..."

*"Luna's tantrum has lasted long enough,"* noted the voice. *"It will be easy enough to end this now."*

"Yes," replied Celestia, sighing a little. "But I wish I didn't have to."

*"She's had time enough to come around on her own. She's hurting ponies. She's hurt YOU."*

Celestia flapped her wings, starting to glide towards the castle. "Yes... with her 'Nightmare Moon'."

*"You needn't fear the Nightmare any longer... it's time to wake her up."*

Celestia clenched her jaw. "Yes... yes it's time. But we... we won't harm her..."

*"Of course not... not Luna. But Nightmare Moon..."*

"... must be destroyed," finished Celestia.

Celestia looked ahead... by air it was not that far to the castle. She reached out her senses and felt around the bubble shell protecting the tower. Several pings notified her of air patrols around the tower and she considered her plan.

*"Straight in, hard and fast, so she doesn't have time to prepare, and those pegasi can't interfere."*

She smiled and nodded, "Yes," she replied. "Yes, that will work."

She focused her magic and formed a spike of swirling plasma before her and set it spinning slowly, then gathered a sphere of magic behind herself.

She marveled to herself. "It has never been so easy to gather and manipulate so much power before."

*"That's what I'm for,"* noted the voice.

Celestia released the magical charge and blasted forward with so much speed that flames spread out around her body, the plasma spike spiraling before her and spreading wide around her body. It was only a couple of seconds before she struck the magical shield and she felt the other magic shatter as though it were made of porcelain. She slammed onto the balcony with all four hooves at once, spraying rock chips in all directions.

There was an instantaneous response from the shadows inside the castle as a bright cyan beam blasted out towards her. Time seemed to slow for her and she was able to watch the beam streaming through the air towards her. She stretched out her wings and flapped once, leaping into the air just high enough to clear it. A quick twist of her wings propelled her forward even as the beam was striking the railing of the balcony behind her, and then she cast her senses forward into the dark.

She instantly recognized the signature of her younger sister, and the amplified magic she still carried. For a moment the recognition triggered fear – Nightmare Moon was just before her. Voices came to her from her memories and her nightmares.

*"Luna, I will NOT fight you..."*

*"Luna? I am Nightmare Moon!"*

The sound of her own scream echoed in her mind as she remembered being struck, but then the calming voice spoke out in warning.

*"Move aside..."*

Celestia blinked and looked to see another beam heading for her. She flapped her wings and darted sideways, the beam passing harmlessly along her flank. Without thinking about it she lowered her own head, and then she fired a powerful orange beam into the shadows to where she felt Nightmare Moon was standing.

For Celestia it felt like several seconds, but she knew it was but a fraction of one before she felt her attack strike the wall. Nightmare Moon had faded into mist and spread herself along the walls, traveling nearly transparently around the room. Even with her enhanced senses Celestia had trouble tracking her.

*"You shouldn't have come back, sister."*

Celestia shuddered as the voice from her nightmares filled her mind, but then her own calming voice replied to her.

*"Focus,"* it said, and Celestia turned her head slowly, trying to track the smoke. She almost had it when there was another blast from the shadows, and she leapt to avoid it. There was another blast as she landed, and she stumbled ducking underneath it.

"Luna, enough!" she cried out, but there was only laughter in response.

*"Luna?"* asked Nightmare Moon. Celestia's blood froze, and she mouthed the words from her nightmares at the same time as they were spoken. *"I am Nightmare Moon!"*

It seemed as though the walls erupted in brilliant cyan magic which converged on Celestia's form. She screamed as she felt the burn of the magic striking her, every part of her every bad dream come true. But in the middle of it, the calming voice spoke through.

*"Focus!"* the voice reiterated.

Celestia looked up with wide eyes as the burning beam narrowed upon her, and before her eyes the mist congregated and solidified into the form of Nightmare Moon. Nightmare Moon glared as her attack continued unabated, a solid beam of burning magic from her horn straight into Celestia's breast.

**"Why did you come back?"** she demanded, advancing slowly. **"I don't want you to be here!"**

Celestia watched her advancing, feeling the burn of Nightmare's attack. She shrank back, but the voice in her head chided her again. *"She's not hurting us. We are stronger than she is."*

"Luna... stop," whispered Celestia.

Nightmare Moon kept advancing. Her pupils were tiny and her eyes wide. **"Why are you making me do this?"**

Celestia's voice was stronger this time, and she was able to lift her head to face Nightmare Moon. "Luna," she repeated. "Stop!"

Nightmare Moon was only a few paces away now, and her voice was even louder. **"Why didn't you stay in the sun?"**

Celestia stood slowly as she spoke, her teeth gritting together. "Luna," she repeated. "I said... ***STOP!***"

With the last word Celestia spread her wings wide and her magic surged. She blasted plasma from every pore of her body, erupting in a brilliant nova that filled the room with flame and pressure. Nightmare Moon was blown backwards and slammed against the wall, a clanging thud echoing through the flames as her armor-clad body slammed to the ground.

The room was silent for a moment and then Celestia stepped forward. The orange glow from her mane and tail lit the room with a dim, shifting light, but she was able to see Nightmare Moon up against the wall. The younger alicorn was moving stiffly but with urgency as she tried to sit up.

"*You see?*" noted the voice. *"No longer anything to fear..."*

Celestia smiled. "Relax," she advised. "I only wish to talk to you..."

Nightmare Moon's eyes were wide as she met Celestia's gaze and her pupils had reduced to mere pinpricks. "No!" she shrieked. "Stay back!" She shuffled backwards against the scorched stone as she got her hooves underneath herself.

Celestia shook her head. "Look at you," she said. "*Nightmare Moon.*" Her tone was mocking as she stepped forward. "To think how frightened I was of you..."

"What... what have you done to yourself, sister?" asked Nightmare in a small voice.

"No less than you did to yourself," growled Celestia. "You don't like it, do you?"

Celestia didn't wait for a response. "No, you don't like to listen to lectures either, I remember that well enough. But you will listen to this one. You've had quite a little tantrum, haven't you? Gone off and made everypony suffer, just like you wanted to. Are they happy now? Are *you* happy now?"

Celestia paused, looking at Nightmare Moon half laying, half sitting on the floor. She was watching Celestia with her eyes still wide, her hooves tucked up underneath her and her ears flat against her skull. "*She's scared*," thought Celestia.

*"She needs to be scared,"* advised the voice.

*"But she's my sister..."*

*"Nightmare Moon put an end to your sister a thousand years ago."*

Celestia frowned.

*"That was why you never looked for her. Because she was gone."*

Celestia thought back. "*But, I meant to.*"

*"You knew it was for naught, and now Nightmare Moon has hurt every pony in Equestria."*

Celestia's frown deepened.

*"She won't stop. You can't let it go. This time you MUST take action."*

"What do you have to say for yourself?" asked Celestia.

"S... sister, please!"

"How many ponies have you hurt?"

"It wasn't like that! I mean... I didn't mean to!"

"How many, Nightmare Moon?" Celestia's voice was growing more impatient.

"I... I don't know. I didn't count... I... things are better now!"

*"She didn't even care. Nightmare Moon could never care."*

Celestia's teeth clenched together as the voice continued. "*She caused all of this. She is how you lost your sister and why you were banished. In your absence she has only brought pain to the ponies of Equestria. You swore to protect them – you have to make this right. Nightmare Moon will forever be a threat.*"

Nightmare started to stand as Celestia paused. "Maybe... maybe enough time has passed," she said. "I... I had grown weary of ruling alone..."

*"Nightmare Moon bargains for your mercy, the last ploy of the dictator. After what she did to Luna, she has the nerve to beg for her position..."*

"Nightmare Moon..." began Celestia, her voice nearly cracking with anger.

"Sister, listen..." interrupted Nightmare Moon, but Celestia cut her off.

**"My sister's name was LUNA!"** she shouted. Nightmare Moon cringed back, cowed.

"But... I am..." she whimpered.

"As I was saying," interjected Celestia strongly. "Nightmare Moon: as Princess of Equestria, I hereby charge you with treason, with bringing harm to every pony in this land, with falsely declaring yourself ruler, with too many crimes to enumerate here. How do you plead?"

Nightmare looked into Celestia's eyes, but all she could see there was the flame that leaked with her magic. Seeing nothing she recognized there, at last she relented. She turned her gaze away and lowered her head. "So it's to be the moon again?" she asked morosely.

Celestia smiled, "Oh no... You would only return in another thousand years, and do it all again. But don't worry; my student came up with a little spell that will do nicely..."

Nightmare looked up, a mixture of concern and curiosity on her face, but she did not reply. Celestia nodded once.

"So be it," she said, planting her hooves. She lifted her head and lit her horn, gathering magic to it rapidly. Having been a part of Sunset's spell, she had gained more than enough knowledge to combine with her experience and re-cast it. The glow around her horn intensified as her eyes brightened. When she spoke, her voice reverberated and seemed to fill the room. To Celestia's ears, it sounded as though her own voice mixed with the strangely calming voice that had been advising her.

"Let justice be served," it said, and Celestia spoke along with it. Her head dipped and her magic streaked out to Nightmare Moon, striking her squarely and quickly surrounding her body with a bright crimson glow. Celestia spent a moment establishing the field, and then pulled backwards, pulling Nightmare's own magic with hers. The crimson of her flaming magic began to mix with swirls of darkness, which themselves

glowed a deep electric blue. All this magic flowed back into Celestia, soon enveloping her in a swirling field of her own.

*"This is the best way to prevent her from being a threat,"* advised the voice. Celestia nodded, although she did not want to distract herself too much from the spell. Nightmare Moon was held largely frozen, but her small and frightened eyes locked onto Celestia. Celestia looked into those eyes and for a moment she saw her young sister in trouble.

*"Luna?"* she thought.

*"Focus,"* reminded the voice. *"That is Nightmare Moon. She needs only a moment of weakness."*

Celestia mentally agreed and refocused herself, looking away from Nightmare's eyes. She felt the energy beginning to soak into her body, filling her with new feelings. She had felt Luna's magic before, but this was so full of emotion and raw energy. Celestia thought she detected dozens of different signatures in the magic... but all that mattered right now was making sure that Nightmare Moon no longer controlled it.

*"She mustn't control ANY magic when we are done,"* advised the voice.

*"She is alicorn,"* Celestia noted. *"She needs SOME magic to survive..."*

*"I will guide you,"* comforted the voice. *"Keep drawing."*

It seemed to drag on for minutes to Celestia, though she realized that the intensity of the spell was distorting her view of time. She observed Nightmare Moon growing smaller as the buffs provided by her enhanced magic drained away. Celestia thought the room was also growing brighter but she continued to focus.

*"That should be enough?"* she wondered to the voice. *"She can't have much more than a standard unicorn now..."*

The voice was stern. *"Nightmare Moon is still a risk. I will tell you when to stop."*

*"But even Nightmare Moon..."*

*"She took your sister! You would risk more?"*

Celestia frowned and strengthened the pull, feeling an additional surge of magic as she pulled harder. She barely noticed Nightmare Moon's panting through the thick flame-like aura of her drain spell.

Suddenly she heard an unexpected deep voice from the edge of the room, calling out to her.

"Ah, Princess Celestia. It is so good to see that you have recovered from your injuries."

Celestia blinked in surprise and let the spell go.

"*Who the...?*" she asked the voice, but it was silent in response.

The spell faded out, the last of the magic absorbed into Celestia's strong body. Nightmare Moon, released from the spell, dropped to the floor with a heavy thud. She was nearly half the size she was when the spell started, her coat a rich blue rather than the deep black, and her mane had regressed to a pale azure blue hair, the plasma gone.

"Luna...?" she asked aloud, and then looked towards the voice. Ulfrid stood near the destroyed door, bowing so that his nose touched the floor. Celestia felt her mind going hazy. "What... what's going on?"

"Ul... Ulfrid..." called Luna weakly. "Help me..."

Ulfrid stood and approached Luna. "All is well, Highness. Your sister has come to visit."

"She.... she came to destroy me..."

"No," comforted Ulfrid. "She is done now. Are you not, Princess?"

Celestia stepped back as a static noise grew steadily in her ears. Her vision seemed to add confusing shadows to everything, and outlines were getting harder to make out. "I don't know... what is going on?"

"It is your sister, Princess Luna," said Ulfrid, sitting patiently.

"No," said Celestia, stepping back again. The static was getting louder and she was finding it difficult to think. "Nightmare Moon took my sister... I sent her away."

"Look for yourself, your Highness," replied Ulfrid.

"I can't... no... I..." Celestia stepped back again, and then turned for the balcony. "I need to leave."

She took a step towards the door, then a second, and a quicker third. By the forth step she broke into a gallop and leapt from the balcony, catching herself with her massive wings and flapping them powerfully as she escaped over the mountains.

## Chapter 25 – Waning Gibbous

"Ulfrid!" cried Luna, watching as Celestia disappeared over the balcony.

"Easy, my liege," said Ulfrid softly. "It is over now."

Luna stood unsteadily and turned to face him. "She... she tried to destroy me!"

Ulfrid faced her with a large plush cushion, only slightly charred, hanging from his muzzle. He set it down gently. "But she did not," he comforted. "Come, sit. Help will soon arrive."

Luna blinked, then made her way to the cushion. She looked up at Ulfrid, now taller than she was by half, and settled into the plush slowly. She buried her head under her wings and shuddered. "Was that really Celestia?" she asked, her voice muffled.

"Aye, Highness," replied Ulfrid. "But she was not herself either."

Luna took a series of deep breaths, burying her face against the cushion. "You said help is coming?" she asked, finally. "The Captain is coming?"

"Aye, my Liege, and he brings Sunset Shimmer."

"Sunset... who?"

Ulfrid smiled. "She is the unicorn that you have been waiting ten years to confront."

Luna frowned in thought, and then she blinked and lifted her gaze towards Ulfrid. She was shocked. "THAT unicorn? Coming here NOW, whilst I am weakened?"

Ulfrid nodded. "She is not the same unicorn as she was so long ago, either. All will be well, but you must be ready to receive her."

"But why is she coming here? How am I to pass sentence in this state?"

Ulfrid smiled, "I do not believe that you will have to, my Liege. But she has played a part in all this and her information will be most valuable, I think."

"But what will I *do* with her?" insisted Luna.

"You are still ruler of these lands, your Highness. Hear what she has to say and then do what you feel is right. That is all anyone would ever ask of you... and that is what I ask of you now."

Luna bit her lip and gazed deep into Ulfrid's eyes for a long time, seeking some form of answer for the questions that always filled her mind when he seemed the sole voice of reason. But there was nothing, save some sense of raw honesty that she always fell back on. Ulfrid's eyes just told her to trust him... and once again, she decided to.

"All right," replied Luna at last. "When will they arrive?"

Ulfrid bowed once again. "Very soon."

Luna rested her head back on the cushion and relaxed as best as she could. True to Ulfrid's word, it wasn't long before she heard hooves galloping up the stairs. Shortly thereafter she heard the Captain's voice.

"Your Highness," he said. "We got here as quickly as we could."

Ulfrid replied for her. "Captain Sterling Honor, Sunset Shimmer. Thank you both for coming." He then looked down to Luna and nodded.

Luna stood and climbed off the pillow to greet her company. She nodded to the Captain, still bowing, and then cast her gaze over the brilliant amber unicorn behind him. She recognized Sunset from her vision, and she was somewhat surprised that such a brilliantly colored unicorn had eluded capture for so long. She found herself thinking that Celestia could not have found a more appropriate looking student to represent the sun.

"We meet at last, unicorn," said Luna. "It would appear that we have much to talk about."

"P... Princess Luna?" Sunset held her place, frozen in shock by the devastation in the room.

Luna nodded once, and then smiled. "So you *do* know my name."

Sunset nodded slowly. "I... of course. Everypony knows the legend, and I've studied it as much as I could."

Luna frowned and took a step forward. "Indeed. So that you could defeat Nightmare Moon, am I right?"

Sunset took half a step back and widened her eyes, but then she lowered her hoof to the ground slowly. She nodded again, averting her gaze. "Yes, Ma'am. But I seem to have only made a bigger mess of everything."

Sterling Honor stepped forward, impatience in his voice. "Enough of this. Your Highness, are you all right? Where is the Solar Princess?"

"Peace, Captain," growled Ulfrid. "There is time enough for that."

"Hold your tongue, dog," growled Sterling in response. "Unless you care to explain where you were during the attack? I take my orders only from the Queen."

"Enough, both of you!" snapped Luna. "Ulfrid stopped the attack, Captain, you need not question his honor. As for my sister, she retreated... I cannot sense her any longer."

Sterling frowned, looking towards the balcony. "So it really was her?" he asked.

Luna nodded to Sterling, "Yes, Captain. There can be no doubt that she has returned." She then turned her attention back to Sunset. "I am told that your name is Sunset Shimmer, is that correct?"

Sunset nodded, "Yes, Ma'am."

"You don't seem to be making any attempt to escape."

Sunset shook her head. "I... I made a mess of things. I messed up ten years ago and I messed up again today. I want to help fix it, if we still can."

Luna's horn lit and she levitated a pillow over towards Sunset. "Sit," she invited. "I wish to hear your story." She smirked. "You can begin where I first saw you, at the Summer Sun Celebration ten years ago."

Sunset's eyes widened, but she accepted the pillow and stiffly sat upon it. "Thank you." After a moment she added, "So you know that it was me all the way back then?"

Luna nodded. "Oh yes. I did not have a clear recollection until recently and now I suspect that may have been only because you were so near. But I remember you."

"Aren't you going to punish me?" asked Sunset.

Luna paused. "Perhaps," she replied at last.

Sterling frowned but said nothing. He stood on guard in a position where he could observe the small group and the open balcony. Ulfrid settled down on the stone floor, stretching his paws in front of himself and Luna summoned her own cushion closer and laid down upon it, facing Sunset. "But I will hear your story for now," she continued. "How came you to be here today?"

Sunset took a deep breath and let it out slowly, bringing back the memories.

"I was a student at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns at the time..."

*Not just any student, either, I was Princess Celestia's personal student. She said that I had more magical ability than any other pony she'd ever met, and that she was going to give me special studies. She was going to help me achieve something great.*

*I didn't know what it was and she wouldn't tell me. I convinced myself that she was going to make me a Princess. I was so full of myself! I didn't study as hard as I should have, but I did enjoy my studies. I loved learning about new magic and trying it out, but I didn't care about anything else.*

*When Celestia sent me to Ponyville to oversee the preparations for the Summer Sun Celebration, I thought it was a waste of my time. I thought we could just as well have sent a few guards. Once I started my inspections, I found there was really nothing I needed to do. But it came together well enough, or so I thought.*

*Then at the grand unveiling, Nightmare Moon appeared instead of Princess Celestia.*

Sunset broke out of her story and looked at Luna apologetically. "Well, I mean you appeared." She frowned. "I knew you must have done something to Princess Celestia, but when you announced that the night would last forever I was terrified. I saw my entire future melting away and I knew I had to act at once. I gathered everything I could and threw it at you in one offensive blast."

She shook her head, her ears folding in shame. "You deflected it so easily and directly back at me without even looking. I had never felt so weak in all my life. I ran, certain that you were going to follow up with a shot of your own and then it would all be over."

Luna chuckled softly and Sunset frowned at her. "Forgive me," Luna said. "If you had only known... I barely detected your attack in time. It was only luck that I managed to deflect it at all, greater luck that it went back to you. I have often dwelt upon what would have happened if that blow had struck. Believe me; I did not want to be hit by that, even with the power I was carrying."

Sunset's jaw dropped. "Why... why would you tell me this?"

Luna shook her head, smiling. "What is the harm? Here we are: three drained unicorns and a wolf. But even if you sought to push a perceived advantage, I am still alicorn and my two most trusted allies are at my side. Beyond that... I would say that we have a greater concern right now, wouldn't you?"

"Celestia," replied Sunset.

"Celestia," confirmed Luna. "Now perhaps you can continue your story and tell me how she came to me as she did."

Sunset nodded. "Yes... well, I went into hiding. I was afraid that you would be looking for me, so I kept undercover and on the move."

Luna made an amused sound. "You did well. Even my Captain's forces were unable to locate you, and I daresay they were pushed hard for at least the first year or so."

Sterling Honor shuffled a little bit at the mention, but he attempted to look detached as Sunset replied.

"I... I stayed as far from the capital as I could. I must have circled Equestria three or four times before I finally settled a year or so ago. I just got tired of running."

"Things were very quiet after that," Sunset continued. "I continued to keep as low a profile as I could. But a few days ago, my diary went off."

Luna tilted her head. "'Went off'? What do you mean?"

"Well, when I was Celestia's student, I had an enchanted diary. If I wrote in it, the words would appear in a similar book that Celestia kept, and vice-versa. I used it to report my progress when I studied remotely. When there was a new message, it would glow and vibrate."

"Fascinating," replied Luna. "So you received a message?"

Sunset nodded. "It was my last connection to my past, so I kept it with me for sentimental reasons. At first, I thought it was a trick, that maybe you found Celestia's book. But I answered the call and met Celestia in the Everfree forest."

Luna's eyebrows went up. "Everfree? So she *was* there after all." She frowned. "Doubtless her arrival was the meteor that was reported."

Sunset looked up. "I... I don't know about a meteor. Actually I didn't ask how she got there, I was just so happy to see her again."

Luna frowned and looked aside. "Of course you were."

Sunset looked down and folded her ears. "I... well, I was. I thought it meant things would be all right again."

"Because things were not all right as they were, of course." Bitterness was starting to seep into Luna's voice.

"Peace, your Highness," interjected Ulfrid, his voice gentle. "The story is not yet complete."

Sunset held her voice for a moment, and then nodded. "I'm sorry."

Luna sighed and looked to Ulfrid, then back to Sunset. "Please continue," she said levelly.

Sunset took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "All right. Well, she was back, but she was really weak. She had almost no magic reserve and her left wing was badly broken. I'm not sure how long she had been at the ruins, but it didn't look like more than a couple of days. And then you appeared, so we had to move. We moved into the crystal caverns under Canterlot, which is where your guard found us."

Luna shook her head. "My sister was anything but drained when she came to me – she was surging at a level I've never seen any pony at before. How did this happen?"

Sunset ground her teeth for a moment and then opened her saddlebag. She drew out Luna's diary and offered it to her. "Celestia had this. I was able to break the spell protecting it, and... well... I used your spell."

Luna took the book in her magic and opened it up. She turned the pages slowly for a few minutes as she read it, the others sitting quietly and watching her. At last Luna spoke, closing the book as she did. "I was very young," she said. "I never expected that another unicorn would attempt to unlock the book for my sister."

Sunset blushed a little. "Um, yeah. Sorry."

"So Celestia has read my words?" Luna asked.

"No," replied Sunset. "I... I didn't tell her that I managed to unlock it."

Luna fixed her with a curious look. "You said you used *my* spell? The spell from this book? That should have been far beyond your abilities, no matter how skilled a unicorn you are."

"Well, not all of it," explained Sunset. "I was able to separate the power transfer you used and adapt it to work on its own."

Luna paused, and then nodded. "Very impressive. But you still would have required a power source, something to draw from. You would not have been able to draw from the land as I did."

Sterling coughed gently, breaking from his attentive stance. "I'm afraid that's where I come in, Highness." He frowned, a combination of annoyance, disgust and embarrassment on his face as he opened his own

saddlebag. He drew the wasted amulet and offered it to Luna. "She used this."

Luna frowned. "Is that your 'family heirloom', Captain Sterling Honor?"

"It's the Alicorn Amulet," offered Sunset. "Or at least, it was. Legend claimed that it could grant the wearer near infinite power. When I saw him wearing it, I took a chance that it would have enough energy to restore Celestia."

Luna took the amulet into her magic field and examined it, rotating it in the air before her. "I am not familiar with this amulet, but if it was a legendary artifact then our laws are quite clear about what was supposed to have been done with it, Captain."

Sterling stiffened his stance and nodded once. "Yes, your Majesty. I am prepared to face the consequences of my actions."

Luna made a dismissive sound. "Later, perhaps," she said. "If we are still able to. Otherwise we may all face the consequences of your actions." She looked at Sunset. "Have you analyzed this? Do you know what was behind its power?"

Sunset shook her head. "No... the transfer spell drained me pretty badly. But we brought it in hopes that you would be able to work out more than I might have."

Luna frowned, and focused on the amulet. "I am not surprised," she said. "No part of that spell was meant to be cast by a mere unicorn." She pondered and drew the amulet nearer, brightening her horn. "I should have enough magic."

Luna frowned as her magic probed the amulet, causing it to glow and sparkle from time to time. Whispered voices, distant and indistinct, seemed to come from the amulet as it rotated. Sunset watched closely until at last the princess let it settle onto the floor.

"It's drained," she announced, "as you expected. But it suggests traces of dark magic indeed. It was a battery of sorts, holding a strong charge. It was probably powered up via many sources... but there was a side effect. Almost certainly any pony under its influence would be tempted by desires, driven to overcome fears or perceived weaknesses."

Sunset nodded. "The information I remember suggested that it would 'corrupt' its user."

Sterling looked at the floor as both Luna and Sunset looked towards him.

"Captain?" asked Luna. "Will you please let us know whether that is an accurate assessment?"

"Yes, your Majesty," replied Sterling dully. He paused, then took a deep breath and continued. "It would make suggestions... encouraged me to take stronger actions to secure my position as your lead commander. It encouraged me to take risks, and once it started, it didn't even seem odd to me that I heard these suggestions."

Luna nodded again, turning back to Sunset without comment. "So we are faced with two questions, then. First, did this curse transfer along with the amulet's power? And if so, what happens when an Alicorn is cursed by the Alicorn Amulet?"

"I... I couldn't even begin to guess," replied Sunset.

"Indeed. You have much to learn about experimenting with unknown magic, Sunset Shimmer. The first rule is: *don't*. You should not have so much as opened my book, let alone try the spells found therein. You *particularly* should not have acted without guidance."

Sunset opened her mouth to protest. "Hey, I..." She stopped, and nodded. "I was just trying to solve everything by myself... I guess you're right. But can we fix it?"

Luna frowned as she considered the question. "I can guess fairly well what my part of the spell did, and from Celestia's appearance we can infer that she received quite a large reserve of magic. But if the amulet is drained, then she can't be drawing any more. The surge may indeed burn itself out."

"Nay, I fear not," commented Ulfrid. All three ponies jumped at the unexpected voice.

"Geez, I forgot you were here!" exclaimed Sunset.

"What do you mean, Ulfrid?" asked Luna. "What did you see?"

Ulfrid bowed his head. "Forgive my intrusion... but a source has been missed. As alicorns, you and Celestia both draw from the land itself. Celestia's draw from the land has been accelerated. Her magic reserve is drawing in a larger proportion of magic than she would normally receive."

Sunset blinked, "Wait... how do you know that?"

Ulfrid looked to Sunset and dipped his head again. "I serve," he replied.

"Not again," muttered Sunset.

Luna frowned, looking pensive. After a moment she spoke again. "Are you saying that she is still drawing power, Ulfrid?"

Ulfrid nodded to Luna. "Aye, your Highness. She continues to increase her reserve, even without the amulet."

"What does that mean?" asked Sunset.

Luna considered for a moment. "Even an alicorn has limits... Celestia cannot draw power forever. The land also has limits. If she draws too much power from one location, the land will lose its magic and become uninhabitable."

Sunset frowned. "In what way?"

Luna turned her head. "A large portion of the magic I used to become Nightmare Moon came from the lands around the Palace. Without the natural protection of Equestrian magic, those lands devolved into what you now see as the Everfree Forest. But that was an artificial, deliberate pull. An alicorn's landed power is more subtle, it's a slow, continuous draw."

Luna mused for a moment. "I do not know if she could truly affect the entire land... although it may mean that her power is nearly limitless. But that is only if she continues to control the magic she draws in. I imagine you know what happens to a unicorn who cannot control her surges?"

Sunset lowered her head and folded her ears. "She dies."

Luna nodded. "Yes."

Sterling made a hemming noise. "So perhaps it will not burn out, but it may resolve itself anyway if we can keep her away long enough?"

Ulfrid rumbled as Luna shook her head. "Even if she were not my sister," she began, "that much magic will not go quietly back to the lands. No, if Celestia succumbs to magical surges of that level the result will be devastating to whatever town she is in, perhaps more."

Sunset frowned. "So all we have to do is find a super-charged alicorn before she overloads, possibly taking the land with her."

Luna nodded again. "That would appear to be the situation."

Sterling fixed Ulfrid with a steady gaze. "What I don't understand is how a wolf could have driven her away?"

Ulfrid dipped his head. "It appears that the curse is unstable in my presence. She grew confused and took her leave."

Sterling stamped a hoof as he returned to attention. "If she is confused, then this is an opportunity. We have the entire Royal Guard at our disposal. I can have six squads of pegasi in the skies within half an hour, and we can rouse the guard in every major city in Equestria inside of an hour. If she's out there, we can find her."

"Very well, Captain," agreed Luna. "Send out your orders."

Sterling saluted and turned to leave the room when Sunset protested loudly. "Princess Luna! You can't be serious! They'll try to hurt her!"

Luna rolled her eyes. "As if they could. Very well. Captain, your orders are to *locate* Celestia, but not to engage her. Is that understood?"

Sterling snorted, but stomped a hoof and nodded as he repeated his salute. "Absolutely, your Majesty."

"Good. Then go."

Sterling turned and made his way quickly down the stairs as Luna turned her attention back to Sunset. "As for you," she commented. "You are still under arrest pending sentencing for your crimes against me. For now, you will stay with me in order to advise and, if necessary, assist with the restoration of the kingdom. Do you have any objections to this order?"

Sunset blinked. "I... I get a say?"

"You will be of no use to me if you are not truly prepared to help. If you choose not to assist me, you will be imprisoned until such time as I can deal with you. I realize that this is not much of a choice, but it is possibly more than you deserve. Time will tell. In any event my own options are rather limited."

Sunset nodded. "I want to help," she stated. "It's mostly my fault in the first place."

Luna fixed Sunset with a strong look, and then nodded slowly. "We will see about that as well. For now..." She levitated her diary up again and flipped the pages open and then placed it on the floor between herself and Sunset. "For now, explain to me which parts of my spell you used. We will need to better understand what has happened to my sister if we are to hope to counter it."

## Chapter 26 – Fire and Ice

Celestia streaked through the darkened sky, a comet tail of flame trailing behind her. Her eyes were wide but unfocused as she flew as rapidly as she could, barely noticing the distant ground as it streaked beneath her. Her mind was filled with a static that bordered on panic.

***"Calm yourself."***

The stern, yet somewhat motherly voice spoke to her from the fading static, and she stopped pushing forward. She frowned softly as her wings coasted on the currents.

*"Calm,"* repeated the voice, less sternly this time.

She flapped her wings backwards a couple of times to slow her flight, and the flaming coma around her faded. Somewhere in the back of her mind she considered that a strange voice was something to be concerned about... but this voice was so familiar and so comforting. Every word made her feel like someone had lifted all the problems from her shoulders... it made her feel safe.

"It's just my own voice," she mused. "Just a side effect of the power transfer, I suppose."

She took deeper breaths and finally looked around herself to see where she was. She had traveled some distance from Canterlot – she could just see the mountains in the distance behind her. Ahead she could see the lights of what she presumed had to be Manehattan on the coast and this helped her get her bearings.

*"You did well,"* commented the voice. *"Nightmare Moon is all but defeated."*

Celestia frowned, but she was willing to go along with it. "But what of Luna?" she asked.

*"Luna is fine. You did exactly what you needed to do."*

Celestia breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness." She looked around as she held her position. The voice spoke up again.

*"Now you may raise the sun and put this darkness behind us all."*

Celestia frowned. "No. There is still one last thing I must try to do."

The voice hesitated, as though unaccustomed to being challenged. After a moment, it did comment.

*"You must still put right what you made wrong before you can face her again."*

"Yes," replied Celestia, turning her head toward the north.

Celestia's mind drifted back to the fateful day in the Frozen North and the all-too-short confrontation that she and Luna had had with King Sombra. She considered, too, that she had left much of this out of her story to Sunset Shimmer.

She had told herself that it wasn't important, that it had no bearing on Sunset's education to know more about it. But now she had to admit to herself that her shame ran deep. She knew that the loss of the Crystal Empire was entirely her own fault.

*She and Luna had set off to reclaim the lands with little idea of what to expect. They flew for hours, but when the city appeared on the horizon they were both awestruck. The city of the Crystal Empire was made entirely of smooth, translucent crystal, and when lit by the final rays of the setting sun the buildings shone and sparkled, beckoning them forward.*

*But as they drew closer, they saw long streaks of jet black crystal zig-zagging through the city. Unlike the crystal everywhere else, these black crystals sucked in the light around themselves. They were most common around the castle in the center of the city, but some streaked out all the way past the city boundaries into the snowy plains.*

*They advanced closer still, and then they saw the ponies. Chained to each other and walking with their heads down, they were marching into and out of deep holes which appeared to be mines. The ponies took no notice of the Princesses, even when they called out. Celestia and Luna exchanged looks, trying to decide what to do next, and then they noticed a movement on the uppermost balcony of the castle.*

*King Sombra wore a crown and a regal red robe, and his horn was lit with an eerie magic that leaked as much as emanated. The same magic leaked from the sides of his eyes, creating a waving violet field of magical power.*

*He called out to them and they swooped around to confront him. He was so sure of himself, Celestia remembered. He was completely unflinching even though he was confronted by two alicorns. It was also true that his arrogance had made Celestia's blood boil, so much that she spoke only in demands and ultimatums.*

*Had Luna even spoken? Celestia found she couldn't remember. She suspected not. Celestia had taken charge and she had made of all of the decisions. It was even Celestia who had decided they didn't need the Elements of Harmony and convinced Luna that they should leave them behind to 'recharge'. Celestia, who had no idea how the Elements even worked, deciding how they had to be used.*

*She had demanded that Sombra surrender. When Sombra refused, who had attacked first? Celestia was certain that he had, but she had responded in a*

*fraction of a second without even a hint of hesitation. Luna had followed her lead, of course, but was Celestia that desperate for a fight?*

*She now wondered whether she hadn't been just as arrogant. No wonder Luna had been so upset.*

*Then she had to realize the horror of Sombra's curse. She and Luna had nearly panicked as they were forced to watch the painfully slow dissolve of everything, of everypony, right in front of them. Luna had begged her for an answer, and she didn't have one. It had only lasted for seconds, but it had felt like hours.*

*She had sworn to protect these ponies, and just like that, they were gone. They were gone and there was nothing she could do about it...*

"I can fix it now," added Celestia. "I can save them..." Celestia's eyes began to fill with tears. "Then Luna might forgive me."

Celestia shook away the tears and frowned, wheeling midair and stretching her wings out wide. She leaned into the north wind and gave her wings a powerful sweep, igniting her flames again as she raced towards the Frozen North.

As the winds grew colder Celestia tightened her jaw, planning as she watched the ground streak past underneath. Ahead she saw the jagged peaks of the Crystal Mountain range, and she altered her course towards where she felt that the Empire's plateau must have been.

*"At this rate, I should be in the vicinity within an hour or so... this is at least twice as fast as I've ever flown before. But then what? I will need to locate the former city, and I am not sure how to do that. Even if I do, what will I draw from?"*

The voice answered her again... it always seemed to have an answer to any question that troubled her. And the answer was always the same.

*"I know where to draw from."*

Again, Celestia answered aloud, barely recognizing that she was speaking. "But there was no trace left behind..."

*"All magic leaves a trace," assured the calming voice. "We need only amplify it enough. We need only to find the loose thread and pull it up."*

Celestia nodded and raced onward. The ground beneath her grew colder and rose into sharp peaks. Flashes of white snow began to appear which brightly reflected the moonlight. Gradually the patches grew more frequent, and then they consolidated into a solid sheet, soon stretching across the horizon. The winds grew stronger and fiercer, and Celestia found them buffeting her body as she cut through them. She had reached the large plateau where the Crystal Empire had been entombed.

She strengthened her resolve and added magic to the flaming coma that surrounded her body, fighting back against the icy winds. To her satisfaction, this succeeded in giving her sufficient warmth for the moment. She looked down to the ground and began scanning left and right, trying to locate herself.

"It must have been somewhere near here..." she mused. Celestia slowed her flight, and then flapped a few times to hold her position. The fire surrounding her body flamed high above her without the forward motion to stream it backwards, but her attention was on the white plains below. She scanned across the snow fields carefully, looking for any sign she recognized. It seemed impossible however - the snow was unbroken in every direction and cast into dunes by the constant winds.

"How will I find it?" Celestia wondered aloud. "There are no landmarks, and even if I were right on top of the city I was not able to sense it after it vanished. It has been over a thousand years since that time, there can hardly be a trace remaining."

Again, her voice answered, and yet it was not her voice. Again, a wave of calm washed over her as it spoke answers. *"A thousand years will weaken any spell,"* noted the voice. *"Even the perfect banishment spell that we cast. Most certainly a dark spell of revenge cast by a renegade unicorn will be very weak now. He could not have destroyed the empire – it must be there somewhere. Just reach out."*

Celestia frowned and then nodded. "I've come this far," she noted. "With this much power I have to be able to find *something*." She closed her eyes and lifted her head, lighting her horn as she channeled magic into a sensing spell. Energy spread from her horn in a perfect sphere, spreading wide around her body and sinking into the ground below.

"I can't feel anything," she said after a moment, turning her head to look around.

*"Search deeper,"* advised the voice.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head upwards. Her horn brightened and a tighter sphere of energy formed around it, casting laser-fine feelers in all directions. She stretched out her senses, feeling through the snow and along the ground, trying to pick up any sense of magic. After several minutes her eyes opened again.

"This isn't working," she complained, frowning in frustration.

*"Tighten your magic so that you can reach deeper. It's down there somewhere."*

"It will take a lot longer to search with a narrow beam..." Celestia mused, studying the plain beneath her.

*"How much time is Luna worth?"*

Celestia blinked and looked back in the direction of Canterlot. Then her horn lit again and she aimed a search beam directly beneath herself. She moved slowly, carrying the beam with her. The magic blasted snow side to side as it struck, sparking as it struck rocks from time to time.

"She's worth the rest of my life," Celestia whispered.

Time lost all meaning to Celestia as she slowly cleared the snow below, her energy reaching deep beneath the ground. But it was not the physical earth that she was searching; her spell expanded into other realms and sent tiny feelers through the cracks of reality itself. The need for so much physical energy was just a side-effect, as with most manifestations of strong magic in this world.

She could feel the flow of power moving as a cooling stream through her body, up along her neck and into her horn, where she focused and directed it. It was more than she typically channeled and yet she felt no strain or discomfort. Although she was focusing on the sensing spell, she found herself wondering again in the corner of her mind.

"What did Sunset do to me? How do I have such reserves?"

Yet again that calming voice responded, putting any hint of a concern at ease. *"She healed us. We took advantage of a surge, and now we put Nightmare Moon's dark magic to good use. That is all, all will be fine."*

"Nightmare Moon's magic?" asked Celestia. She paused her search while she listened for an answer. It didn't take long.

*"Feeding the Nightmare magic back into this way lets us bring balance back, to counter the evil that Luna did. The more of her magic we use for good, the easier that she may be re-accepted by Equestria."*

Celestia started. "Luna is no longer landed?" she asked.

*"This is why you must succeed,"* assured her voice.

Celestia frowned and refocused her attention on the search spell, flaring her horn and digging even deeper. The path she cleared in the snow was easily ten feet across, but it was still slow going.

"At least the snow makes for a good marker of where I've looked," she mused. She paused again and lifted her head to look across the vast fields of snow.

"Is this even possible?" she asked the voice. "What if I am in the wrong area altogether? It all looks the same."

*"There is a way to search a greater area..." offered the voice. "It would improve our odds greatly if we drew power directly from the land."*

Celestia frowned. "That is not usually a good idea, and I have so much magic already."

*"It will be fed directly back, after all. With a continuous flow of magic, we can maintain this surge and search from a greater altitude, covering a much wider area. You would only need to pull for a few hours."*

Celestia considered for a moment. "I am not sure I can channel a large surge for that long... it may burn me out."

*"You have the Nightmare magic to protect you, and you need this to make things right with Luna. You are strong enough."*

Celestia considered, looking around. *"I suppose there isn't a lot to damage here at the moment... and I cannot afford to fail. I am strong enough."*

"Very well," she agreed aloud. She closed her eyes and arched her head, pulling from the land itself. At first nothing appeared to happen and she wondered if she was asking for too much, if the land had refused. But then she felt the first tendrils of magic responding to her pull.

She seized these tendrils mentally and pulled them upwards, widening each narrow thread into a thicker trunk. The magic began to flow into her body at a greater rate, and she became so bright that the fields below shone as if in daylight.

*"Well done,"* complimented the voice, but Celestia was no longer listening for it. She flapped her wings several times and rose higher in the sky. The thick trunks of magic from the ground formed grand arches as they reached up to her, and after a moment Celestia sent a probing beam back to the earth.

This time it struck with enough force to blast not only snow but rock and dirt as well, clearing three times the area it did previously. Celestia's mind was focused on the massive amount of sensory information coming back from the search spell, such that she was barely aware of anything else.

It felt like forever and it felt like no time had passed, but she somehow knew that it must have been hours before she finally felt something. Her heart jumped through her growing fatigue, and she let the magic wrap around it, trying to determine form.

"I have something," she whispered.

"Pull," suggested the voice. *"Bring it to the surface."*

Celestia strained for a moment, and then shook her head, panting. "I can't," she whined. "Even with all this power, I can't move it."

The voice was quiet for a moment, and Celestia began to wonder if it had left her again. All at once, it spoke to her again.

*"You can,"* it stated. *"The land has grown its own magic back around the artifact. Destroy the bonds that have grown around it, and all will be freed."*

Celestia pondered. It made sense that much as the physical land would fill in around an object, so would the magic of Equestria. If she had found what she was looking for, it would need to be dug out.

"Yes," confirmed the voice. *"Put everything you have into it."*

Celestia frowned, and then took a deep breath. All at once the thick trunks of magic feeding her from the earth changed to a brilliant crimson flame, and her search beam went white-hot, blasting into the earth. Rocks flew but it was not the land she attacked: it was the magic of the land. She drew the power into herself, transformed it, and used it to shatter the bonds of the land itself.

She could feel the shape of the magical landscape beneath her changing, but the flow through her body was searing. Tears began to flow as she gritted her teeth against the physical pain.

***"Harder!"*** insisted the voice.

Celestia's focus continued. She could feel the strength of the magical flow and she knew that to lose control now would destroy her, but all the same she could feel the edges of her control burning away.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a more reasoned voice raised an objection. *"It's too old and too strong!"* the new voice insisted. Celestia could feel her strength bleeding away. *"You have to stop!"*

But Celestia wouldn't stop.

## Chapter 27 – Cold as Ice

A couple of hours after Sunset and Luna had started studying the book, Luna lit her horn and closed it. The candles had burned very low by this time and Luna stifled a yawn. She then looked across the closed book to Sunset. "I think I understand," she said.

Sunset looked rather excited, her ears forward. "Do you want to go over it again, maybe? I don't mind!"

Luna chuckled softly. "Have you no fatigue, Sunset Shimmer?"

Sunset blushed and folded her ears. "Oh... sorry Princess. I'm used to studying all night and it's been a long time since I've learned so much. Your magic is amazing!"

Luna made a thoughtful sound and nodded, standing up. "I thank you for your assistance. It's very clear that you understand a great deal about magic. If the situation were different, I might have enjoyed teaching you myself."

Sunset blushed further and turned her head. "Thank you, Princess Luna."

Luna nodded towards Ulfrid, who stood as well. He dipped his head and spoke gently. "So all is understood now, my liege?"

Luna nodded again. "I believe so, Ulfrid. Based upon the components of the spell that Sunset Shimmer was able to cast, and the remnants of magic left in the Alicorn Amulet, it would appear that the charge of the amulet along with the curse will have transferred to my sister. She must be very confused."

Sunset stood as well. "That means, if we follow correctly, that she has regained her full power, possibly even more."

Luna frowned, "Most certainly more, I would say. In her greatest tempers I have never seen her flare as she did when she confronted me. And that was before she took away *my* powers."

"Then there is the additional drain from Equestria that you mentioned, Ulfrid," added Sunset. "Although I have to admit that I still don't understand exactly what that means."

Luna nodded back to Sunset. "It has not been a subject of much research in the past, largely due to the scarcity and responsibilities of landed alicorns. Really, it is mostly known to alicorns by tradition and

legend. I was not sure that I believed in it myself before we found Equestria. But it made us both feel... complete."

Sunset hesitated for a moment, and then shook her head. "But then why did you work so hard to overthrow Celestia and take over? I mean, I got from your diary that you were frustrated and that you felt neglected by Equestria, but... I just don't understand why."

Luna's expression fell and she turned her head away, looking first at Ulfrid, and then at the blank stone wall itself. "It was not Equestria I was angry at, so much..." she said, very softly. "I might have tolerated that."

Sunset cast a glance at Ulfrid, who merely nodded once back towards Luna. Sunset remained quiet and looked back at Luna, waiting for her to finish.

After a moment longer, she did. "It was Celestia I was angry with. Whenever I tried to confide in her, she would brush me off. After hundreds of years of being the only pony I could ever talk to, she suddenly didn't have time for me."

Luna's jaw tightened, and her face hardened. "All because of these little ponies who came up and kissed her hooves at every opportunity... who would *make* opportunities just to kiss her hooves. For whom I was just the sister of the Great Solar Princess, a token symbol that nopony had any interest in, no matter how hard I worked!"

Her head came around rapidly and she fixed Sunset Shimmer with a glare. "How would *you* feel if your entire world vanished overnight, leaving you just a lonely face in the shadows?"

Sunset frowned right back at her. "Oh, I don't know," she began with a defiant note in her voice. "Except that's exactly what *you* did to me. You took away my teacher, you took away my future, and you reduced me to a fugitive who was afraid that every hoofstep was the guard coming to take me away."

Luna met Sunset's glare for almost a full minute, and then her face softened. She laughed softly. "If we manage to come through this intact, Sunset Shimmer, you shall be forgiven." She paused, and then spoke more softly. "Perhaps one day you will even forgive me."

Sunset didn't relax quite so quickly, but she did nod slowly. "I guess, maybe..." she responded. "Do you think that you and Celestia will be able to work things out?"

Luna's eyes betrayed an otherwise hidden flinch, but she responded confidently. "We won't know until we break this curse."

"And just how are we supposed to do that?" asked Sunset.

Luna frowned anew, this time in concentration. "I am uncertain. I have already tried talking to her; she would not listen to reason even before she took away my powers."

"There's the feed from the land... if we could break that, would she burn up the rest?"

Luna mused it over for a moment. "I am not even certain that is possible..." She turned her head back to Ulfrid. "Ulfrid, you seem to know something about our connection to the land, is there anything that you can offer?"

Ulfrid dipped his head slowly. "There is nothing I can offer, my liege. The contract with a landed alicorn is for life. The Oath welcomes her."

Sunset tilted her head. "Oath? What oath?"

"So long as they act in the interests of the land, the land welcomes them," replied Ulfrid gently.

"How can you possibly say that Nightmare Moon was in the best interests of Equestria?" Sunset demanded.

Ulfrid dipped his head in deference to Sunset. "That I cannot answer, young pony."

Luna frowned at Sunset's question and spent a moment looking at her hooves, her expression flickering between angry frustration and embarrassment.

Before she could reply, however, there was a sudden clattering of hooves on the staircase, followed by Sterling Honor launching himself into the room. He landed in a bow and spoke quickly. "Your Highness!" he exclaimed. "I apologize for the intrusion, but we have a report from the unicorns stationed near the Crystal Mountains. A fireball was seen streaking north into the Frozen Wastelands, and they have detected powerful magic. It can only be Celestia."

Luna considered for a moment and glanced down at Sunset. She then looked back to Sterling. "Captain, take Sunset Shimmer and provide her with provisions for a travel to the Frozen North. We will leave by air in fifteen minutes. You will collect a mixed squad and follow after us... we will expect you by midnight."

Sterling stood and saluted. "At once, my liege."

"Wait!" called Sunset. "Princess, I can't fly!"

Luna stretched out her wings. "I have recovered enough to carry you. We will evaluate the situation, and assess what we can do. We will discuss your plan on the way."

Sunset blanched. "But I don't have a plan, Princess!"

Luna smiled. "You will develop one," she replied. She turned her head. "Ulfrid?"

"I will accompany you, my Liege," he responded. "But I shall travel by paw. Wolves were never meant to fly." He smiled, showing his fangs.

"Can you keep up?" asked Luna.

Ulfrid bowed, "I serve," he replied.

Luna nodded, "Very well. Sunset Shimmer, go with Captain Sterling Honor now, and meet me back here in fifteen minutes. It is a long flight to the Frozen North. I cannot think of many things that she might be doing up there..."

"Do you think maybe she's just going into hiding?" asked Sunset.

"If her magic is flaring, then she must be preparing some form of spell." Luna paused a moment and then continued. "But we shall have to see what it is. Go now."

Sunset nodded and followed Sterling out of the room. Luna watched them leave and then stood silent for several minutes. Then, slowly and without a word, she began to walk along the walls of the room to where the shattered remnants of Nightmare Moon's armor lay. Her horn lit and the fragments glowed as she approached them, each lifting up and following her. Each shard locked into its proper position as it was acquired, and when the pieces were complete she lifted them over her body. The armor settled upon her body and then adjusted magically to fit snugly. Luna broke her silence by speaking tiredly as she donned the battered armor.

"This could be my last journey, Ulfrid," she confided. "I have no strength for a battle with my sister."

Ulfrid approached and sat down next to her. "Yet you intend to confront her all the same," he observed.

Luna sighed softly as her helmet rose from a small chest. Since she was not wearing it during Celestia's attack, it shone smooth and undamaged. Luna rotated it slowly in the air before herself for a moment before settling it gently over her head, where it was likewise adjusted to fit.

"I must," she replied. She was quiet for a moment longer, and then spoke again, more softly. "Sunset Shimmer was correct," she said.

Ulfrid looked to her. "About what, my liege?"

Luna's gaze fell to her hooves. "Equestria has rejected me. I have not felt the welcome of the land's power since I returned from the Moon. Nightmare Moon did not act in the land's best interest... at least at first."

Ulfrid was quiet at that. After a moment, Luna continued.

"Celestia has all the power of the Alicorn Amulet, and the power of the Nightmare magic I absorbed, and on top of that you believe that she still has the welcome of the land. I have only my alicorn magic, and that restores slowly. Perhaps... perhaps she truly was meant to rule all along, without me."

Ulfrid looked at her curiously for a moment, and then he spoke. "Do you truly believe that your sister means you harm?" he asked gently.

Luna replied without looking up. "The intent was there," she replied. "I could feel it."

"But she is not herself."

"No," replied Luna quietly.

"So," prompted Ulfrid. "Do you truly believe that your sister *means* you harm?"

Luna half raised her head to look at him. "Does it matter what she means?"

"It matters a great deal, my liege."

Luna sighed softly and raised her head again, studying the ceiling. Her eyes saw through it to the grand expanse of the night sky beyond. After a minute's contemplation, she responded. "Celestia would not intentionally hurt me, no."

Ulfrid bowed deeply. "That is all you require to save her, your highness."

Luna looked at him again and this time her expression was wistful. "And if, by some miracle, I do manage to put things right with Celestia again, then what? Another thousand years locked away as punishment for my crimes? Should I just accept my fate and hand Equestria back to Celestia?"

Ulfrid shook his head slowly. "I cannot advise on that, my liege. But you should speak with your sister before you resign yourself to a fate that may not come."

Luna closed her eyes for a moment, her chest tightening. "I know that I made a lot of mistakes," she started. "But I thought that I had made at least some of it right again."

Ulfrid smiled reassuringly. "The story is not yet over, your Highness. Have confidence in yourself and in your sister."

Luna sighed and lowered her head. "Whatever," she responded.

Ulfrid cleared his throat quietly, and then spoke again. "Appearances, my liege. Sunset Shimmer and Sterling Honor return."

Luna looked at him, tilting her head curiously, and then she heard the clattering of hooves on the staircase. She drew herself to her full height and stood facing the doorway.

Sterling Honor entered first, dropping into a low bow. He had changed into a heavier armor, a plate-mail that covered his flanks as well as his forelegs. "We are prepared, Your Highness," he stated. "Sunset Shimmer is prepared and my squad will be ready to follow you within half an hour."

Sunset followed after him a little more slowly and with considerably heavier breathing. She was equipped with thin chain-mail that draped over her head and down her neck, containing her mane. Additional chain covered her body and strapped atop that were two heavy-looking saddlebags bearing the crescent moon symbol. "Don't you *ever* get tired?" she snapped between breaths. She started to lie down, fussing with the chain.

Princess Luna chuckled. "Was the chain-mail really necessary, Captain?" she teased.

Sterling remained in his bow. "I thought it best to be prepared for any eventuality, your Highness."

"At least you were quick," noted Luna, turning her attention back to Sunset. "On your hooves, Sunset Shimmer," she ordered. "You may think that you are tired now, but I am the pony who must carry you and your provisions for the next several hours."

Sunset looked up guiltily, finally looking at Luna. She gasped as she recognized the armor Luna wore. "Nightmare Moon!" she whispered.

Luna nodded, "Yes, Nightmare Moon," she responded. "Now come, we have a long journey ahead of us."

## Chapter 28 – Yesterday's Storm

Sterling Honor watched while Sunset Shimmer and Princess Luna negotiated their upcoming travel to the north. His mind was already making the necessary plans to carry out the Princess' order. He would need reconnaissance, he would need to organize a guard prepared for the long march, he would need provisions...

All at once his ears perked to the Princess ending the discussion.

"But we shall have to see what it is. Go now."

Sterling saluted sharply and turned towards the door, glancing back only long enough to ensure that Sunset Shimmer was prepared to follow. When she moved he set off at a gallop, running down the stairs as rapidly as he dared.

He heard Sunset behind him, moving with a little more caution. She called out in frustration. "Slow down, just for once in your life!" she called. "The last thing I want to do is to break my neck falling down these stairs!"

He grimaced, but forced himself to slow his pace, allowing her to catch up. When they reached the bottom, he turned to her. "Level ground, no broken necks. All right? Now we gallop. We have very little time to get you ready."

He paused just long enough for her to see that he was serious, and then he set off towards the barracks. With a sigh audible over his own galloping hooves he heard Sunset start up after him. The two of them arrived at the barracks just a few seconds apart. Sterling smirked at her.

"You know, if you didn't complain so much, you'd actually make quite a good recruit. Not many civilians can keep up with me."

Sunset panted softly and shook her head. "And if you didn't..." she started, but she was interrupted when Sterling shouted into an open door.

"Sergeant Impulse! Front and center!"

Sunset snickered when the Sergeant appeared in his doorway. He cast only a quick glance at Sunset before coming to attention before the Captain and saluting sharply.

"Something funny, Ms. Shimmer?" asked Sterling Honor.

"Where's his mane?" smirked Sunset, giggling.

Sterling rolled his eyes, "Behave yourself," he replied, "or I'll team you up with Corporal Stratosphere."

Sunset stopped smirking.

"Sergeant Impulse," continued Sterling. "I need you to organize our ponies immediately for travel to the Frozen North. The Queen has demanded a mixed squad, and they will need to be outfitted to deal with the cold. We do not know what we will be facing, but reports are that the Sun Princess Celestia is our target."

Impulse's eyes widened, and his lips tightened. "Y..yes sir!" he responded.

"I will return to inspect the troops in thirty minutes. On your way, unlock the armory so that I may prepare Ms. Shimmer here to escort the Queen."

Impulse managed to look even more surprised, and he eyed Sunset suspiciously. "But sir," he began. "In the Queen's current state... is that wise?"

"Those are her wishes, Sergeant, are you questioning your orders?"

Impulse snapped back to attention and saluted again. "Sir! No Sir!"

"Then to your duties! Dismissed!"

Impulse snapped his hooves and then turned aside, galloping down the road. Sterling looked back to Sunset.

"I appreciate that you have won the trust of the Queen, but you'll forgive me if I ask that you continue to treat my guard with respect. We will support you as we have been ordered, but you are still a serious criminal in my eyes, and until you face those charges you will remain a pony of interest. Do I make myself clear?"

Sunset frowned, and then nodded. "Yes... I'm sorry. That was very rude of me."

"It was," replied Sterling, turning down the road Impulse had run down. "If you must know, it was by my order that he looks like that, and I have all the respect in the world for that soldier. Come now, the armory is around the corner here. I know exactly what you need."

Sunset followed him, letting some of her smirk return. "No gallop this time?"

Sterling chuckled. "Hm. Wait for it," he responded.

Sunset trotted a few steps to catch up and then walked alongside Sterling. "I don't get you, though. I mean... you seem so absolutely certain of yourself. How can you follow Nightmare Moon after all she's done?"

"Oh? And what has she done?" Sterling replied.

"Are you serious? She overthrew Celestia and cast Equestria into eternal night! She led by fear and shut down everything Celestia ever built! She took away our home!"

"Funny," replied Sterling, stopping before an open door and motioning Sunset to enter. "She gave me mine."

*Ten years ago, I was a member of Celestia's Royal Guard. I was headstrong and an idealist. I worked directly underneath the Captain of the Guard – Captain Hardbottom. He was an angry stallion... always shouting, never satisfied. But he was also experienced and he had been with Princess Celestia for a long time, so I trusted him even when his orders seemed inefficient. When his guard was down, he had fascinating stories about when diplomatic missions went wrong. Equestria usually didn't learn about Celestia's failures... but did you never wonder what happened to trade with the Griffin Kingdom, or why the dragons refused to acknowledge our leadership?*

*Celestia was a powerful alicorn and she had Equestria's best interests at heart, but it seemed like she was always second-guessing herself. She would err on the side of caution even when the consequences of that error were worse than being forward would have been. She acted like a pony whose confidence had been shattered – in fact it's not unreasonable to believe that it had been.*

*Hardbottom was there in Ponyville when Nightmare Moon returned from her exile, although I was not. Instead I was charged with defense of Canterlot Castle while he went on ahead to prepare things for the Princess. I suppose I was one of the first ponies to see Nightmare Moon... although at the time I did not connect her with the old mare's tale. At first, I did not know who I was seeing.*

*I was on guard in the hallway leading to Princess Celestia's study. She was preparing for her flight to Ponyville when a cloud of purple smoke whisked right past me. I was startled, but I gave chase. I felt a terrible chill when it turned into the study and I drew my weapon, shouting to warn the Princess.*

"Princess! Take caution!!!"

*Before I could reach the study itself, the doors slammed shut and a glow surrounded them. I slammed my shoulder against them with the full force of my charge, but they would not move. I struck the door repeatedly and I even tried several spells to no effect. Concerned, I paused to listen, and I heard voices.*

Sterling levitated a set of chain-mail armor towards Sunset. "Put this on," he ordered. "A light mail, just in case."

Sunset took the mail into her own levitation spell, and her eyes widened. "You call this light?" she asked.

"You'll be glad for it if you need it," replied Sterling, speaking more authoritatively. "Put it on." He paused a moment, then resumed his story. "I heard voices, as I said..."

*"You cannot win," Celestia was saying. "The Elements of Harmony will always protect this land."*

*"Hab!" sneered the second voice, whom I now know was Nightmare Moon. "I know just as well as you that you cannot wield the Elements. I have already been to secure them and I found them worthless. You have destroyed them, no doubt by attacking ME!"*

*"Others will rise," insisted Celestia. "Please..."*

*"Silence! All you have proven is that Harmony is just another lie! That every bond may be broken! And now I will repay the favors you've done for me."*

*"Luna, please! I do not want to fight you."*

*"I told you last time, dear sister. I am **NIGHTMARE MOON**. And now it is time for you to take a leave of absence."*

*A brilliant light began to seep around the edges of the door and I charged it again, battering it to try and make it move. I should have called for the guard, but my only thought was to get into that room before it was too late.*

*And then suddenly, it was. The doors swung open and I fell forward, my weapon spinning across the floor as I lost control of it. She was standing right in front of me, looking down at my awkward pose with such an expression of confidence and power. I'd seen Princess Celestia up close, of course, but she had never been focused on me. She was usually more focused on whatever decision was troubling her. Nightmare Moon carried herself with a confidence that enveloped me. She just stood there, looking at me.*

*I didn't move, save to look up, and I didn't speak. I lost myself as my eyes met hers – even my fear evaporated. It only lasted an instant, but it felt like forever. Then she turned, walked around me, and left the room. She wasn't in a hurry and she didn't say anything. I later learned that her next stop was Ponyville.*

"So you're *in love* with Nightmare Moon?" asked Sunset incredulously. "I guess that explains a lot, but..."

"It's not like that," replied Sterling, levitating over the first saddlebag, which was packed near bursting. "She just commanded so much respect in that instant... I felt like for the first time in my career that somepony KNEW what to do next. She had so much power around her that she was a natural leader. But that wasn't all."

*I snapped out of it and immediately searched the room for Princess Celestia. Finding no trace, I sounded the alarm and briefed the guards. We were too late to find anything, of course, and we didn't learn what happened in Ponyville until many hours later.*

*We learned after Nightmare Moon returned to the castle and announced that she herself was the new ruler of Equestria – a Queen to replace the failed Princesses. Some of the guard challenged her immediately – they were merely swatted aside. Her power was beyond anything that any of us were prepared to deal with.*

*I was torn... but my pledge was to Equestria. Plunging the country into civil war would not be in anypony's best interests, so until such time as we knew better, I aligned myself with the guard who chose to accept her rule – which included my mentor. But many guards did leave. They were permitted to leave with a warning against open dissent. Even so, some did attempt to form groups aimed at unseating Nightmare Moon's rule. I know, because I personally shut many of them down. But I am getting ahead of myself.*

*The guard changed a great deal in those first months. The night encouraged darker ponies to crawl out of the woodwork, from every nook and cranny of Equestria. Dark of soul, I mean, and they came to join the guard based on a vision of serving the 'dark' Queen. Hardbottom accepted them just to bolster our numbers in the face of resistance, but the quality of the guard suffered and many of the new guard were cruel beyond their rightful limits.*

*Nightmare Moon was strict, yes, and she was a dictator, yes. But I did not see her as evil. Celestia had been just as firm on certain policies, after all. And so these new ponies bothered me greatly. I began to lose faith that I had made the right choice. I had heard that the Wonderbolts had set up a resistance camp and I began to wonder whether a unicorn could join them. But I never forgot her eyes... that memory would come to me in moments of doubt.*

*All at once, I was summoned for an audience. Guilt over my thoughts of treason and stories of ponies vanishing all flooded to my mind at once and I began to doubt my belief of her good side. But I steeled my will and presented myself before her throne. I was so nervous that I just buried my muzzle in the carpet when I bowed, and waited for the end.*

*She was quiet for a moment before speaking.*

*"You were the guard on duty in the tower on the night that I returned to Canterlot. Is this correct?"*

*It was the first time she had ever spoken to me, and her voice sent chills down my spine. Every word was spoken with strength and conviction.*

*"Yes, Your Majesty," I replied. My words must have been a bit muffled, because she sounded a little annoyed when she replied.*

*"Remove your muzzle from the carpet and address me directly!"*

*I snapped to attention. "Yes, Your Majesty!" I repeated.*

*"You did not attack me," she commented.*

*"N.. No, Your Majesty."*

*"You did not call for backup."*

*"No, Your Majesty." I have to admit that by this point I felt very small.*

*"You fell on your face and did not move." I swear she smirked as she said this one, but I was trying not to look into her eyes.*

*"Y... yes, Your Majesty."*

*"Why?" This question was direct and very pointed, and she watched me carefully.*

*"I... I could not, Your Highness."*

*"Frightened?" she demanded.*

*"I... no, Your Majesty."*

*She leaned forward a little bit. "Then what?" she insisted.*

*I was not sure how to reply... I barely knew myself what had come over me on that day. Finally I spoke the only truth I could think of. "In... awe, Your Majesty."*

*She snarled. "You dare to patronize me? I would not hesitate to destroy you!"*

*Then I said the stupidest thing I've ever said in my life. "But you didn't, Your Highness."*

Sunset smirked. "You did not," she replied. "How are you still standing here if you did?"

"Most ponies would say you were right about that, but that triggered something in her..."

*She stared at me for a long time, long enough that even though I've been trained to hold at attention in the face of an inspection, I started to get very nervous. When at last she spoke again, her words left me speechless.*

*"Why is the Royal Guard so lacking in discipline?" she demanded.*

*I don't mind confessing that those words chilled me to the core. I did my best to save myself. "If I have offended your Majesty, I can only apologize. I meant only to speak honestly!"*

*But she only waved a hoof and finally broke off the piercing gaze. She turned back towards her throne as she spoke. "Not you, Captain. But I speak of everypony else."*

*Again I was caught off guard, but I felt it important to stay honest. "I... my apologies, ma'am. I'm only second in command. I can fetch Captain Hardbottom for you...?"*

*She smirked back at me, turning around again. "Mister Hardbottom," she emphasized, "will be on vacation for quite some time. In the meantime, Captain, you will bring up discipline in the Guard to a level worthy of Canterlot. Do I make myself clear?"*

*Stunned though I was, I fought to keep my composure. I snapped back to attention and saluted. "Yes, ma'am! Thank you ma'am!"*

*She waved a hoof again as she settled down onto her throne. "Good," she commented, starting to sound bored. "Away with you, then. I will call for you when I desire a report."*

Sterling levitated the second saddlebag over to Sunset, who accepted it with her magic and a grimace. "So that was that, then?" she asked. "You took over the guard and it was 'evil' ever after?"

Sterling frowned. "Given the liberties being granted to you, you could offer a little more in the way of respect, if not outright manners."

Sunset sighed softly, adjusting the saddlebags across her back. "I guess you're right. You could have just tossed me in prison, and you didn't. Nightmare Moon could have banished me to the moon, and she didn't. But I can't help but think it's only because you both expect me to betray Princess Celestia."

Sterling fixed her with a stern look. "If the powers have unbalanced her and created a monster, would you choose Celestia or Equestria?"

Sunset winced at the question and for a moment had no response. Before she started to speak, Sterling continued.

"Pray that you do not have to choose," he advised. "But if you do, make sure that you have thought about what the right choice is. Are you ready?"

"Yes, almost... but wait. I still don't understand *WHY* you follow her orders with such passion."

"It is my duty," replied Sterling simply. But after a pause, he added, "But, after I tightened up the guard, she came to call on me for other issues. She would ask me questions about the citizens, about business, and she would weigh my answers even if I didn't know. Even when she didn't take my advice, I felt like she honestly considered it. I came to deeply appreciate those times that we would talk about Equestria."

"So I was right! You DO love her!" Sunset crowed.

Sterling grimaced. "You're being rude again. No... I do not consider myself on her level at all. It's a professional respect... and a feeling that she was judged unfairly and deserved somepony who would be honest with her. I had even begun to consider her some form of friend, until that wolf showed up."

Sunset blinked. "You mean Ulfrid? What's his story?"

Sterling frowned and shook his head. "We have delayed long enough. Back to the tower now: double-time!"

## Chapter 29 – Crimson Moon

Sunset panted as she chased Sterling Honor up the long winding staircase into the royal tower. She found that she had to step higher than normal to manage the extra weight of the chain-mail and it took her a great deal more effort to keep up.

Sterling charged through the empty doorway into the royal chambers at the top of the stairs first and dropped into a low bow. "We are prepared, Your Highness," he stated. "Sunset Shimmer is prepared and my squad will be ready to follow you within half an hour."

Sunset followed after him, a little more slowly and with considerably heavier breathing. "Don't you *ever* get tired?" she snapped between breaths. She studied the floor and started to lie down as she tried to catch her breath, barely listening as Princess Luna commented on the chain.

"On your hooves, Sunset Shimmer," ordered Luna abruptly. "You may think that you are tired now, but I am the pony who must carry you and your provisions for the next several hours."

Sunset looked up guiltily and with just a hint of annoyance. But her breath caught as she saw that Luna had changed as well - now wearing a perfectly sized version of the armor she had worn as Nightmare Moon. A flash of fear ran down her spine as she gasped aloud. "Nightmare Moon!" she whispered.

Luna nodded in response. "Yes, Nightmare Moon. Now come, we have a long journey ahead of us."

Sunset got back onto her hooves and bit her lip nervously. Luna turned back towards Sterling Honor. "We will leave immediately. Go see to your troops."

Sterling bowed and nodded. "Yes, Ma'am. What are your orders if we should encounter the Solar Princess without you?"

Luna frowned and considered for a moment. "Ideally I will be there long before you. But if I have already fallen..." She stopped speaking, turning her head towards the balcony.

Sterling frowned and tilted his head. "Your Highness?"

Luna blinked back into focus and looked back towards Sterling. "Never mind," she snapped. "Contain any threat if you can. Your priority is the defense of Equestria."

Sterling looked somewhat relieved and bowed again. "Of course, Your Highness."

Luna nodded again. "Go then," she ordered. As Sterling turned back towards the stairs Luna turned towards Ulfrid. "And you, dear Ulfrid? Are you ready?"

Sunset's eyes widened at the term of endearment and she looked towards Ulfrid as the great wolf stood, and then lowered himself into a deep bow. "Ready now and always, my liege. I will follow your progress from the ground."

Luna paused a moment and took half a step towards Ulfrid, her eyes widening slightly, then she seemed to notice Sunset and placed her hoof back on the ground. "Safe travels, my friend," she said quietly.

Ulfrid held his bow, but lifted his head. "Good luck on your mission, Highness."

Luna paused only a moment longer and then turned towards the balcony. She spoke again, this time her voice was sharp and pointed. "Sunset Shimmer! Come now."

Sunset watched as Ulfrid returned to a standing pose, and the wolf nodded her towards Luna with a smile. Sunset turned and trotted to catch up with Luna, reaching her as they both stood outside on the grand balcony.

She took a step towards Luna and then hesitated again. "Is... is this all right? Can you really carry me? You're barely half again as large as I am."

Luna's eyes narrowed. "Do not underestimate me, Sunset Shimmer. I am still Alicorn, and my recovery is quicker than you may think. I can carry you." She spread her wings. "Climb onto my back."

Sunset approached Luna and then hesitated again. Luna's horn lit and her magic lifted Sunset onto her back, and then at once Luna leapt into the air. She spread her wings wide until they caught the currents of the wind, and then she gave a powerful flap to send herself skyward.

Sunset's eyes widened and her heart raced, and she instinctively lit her horn to help herself cling to Luna's armor. Luna's body undulated underneath Sunset as she continued to climb, each powerful stroke of her wings casting Canterlot further behind them. Sunset dared to look down, but they were already over the fields surrounding the White City and she did not recognize the terrain gliding by far beneath them.

After a few more minutes Sunset began to take control of her breathing, willing it to slow. Luna climbed higher still and broke into a

layer of cloud, hiding the ground from sight. There was nothing to see through the heavy vapor until suddenly they emerged atop it. Sunset gasped aloud - a beautiful skyscape of lightly tufted cloud tops stretched beneath them, lit silver by the light of the bright moon above. Luna spoke at last.

"Have you regained control of your senses, Sunset Shimmer?"

Sunset started, and then nodded. "Y-yes, Princess."

"Good," replied Luna. "Then we will strategize."

Sunset folded her ears. "I... I don't really know what to do. I haven't got a plan."

"I do not expect you to," replied Luna curtly. "But, you have spent more time with my sister since her return than any other pony. You have insight into her state of mind that I do not. There are no other ears here - you may speak freely."

"What are you going to do?" asked Sunset. "Are you going to hurt Celestia?"

Luna sighed softly. "Sunset Shimmer, you have seen all that has transpired. If it comes down to a fight, it is very unlikely now that I would prevail. But whatever you may believe that you know about me, my duty is clear. My sister is overloaded with magical power, afflicted with an ancient curse, and behaving unpredictably. She must be stopped. But if there is anything we can use to talk sense into her, then we must try."

Sunset frowned a little. "I think all she wanted was for you to stop being Nightmare Moon," she said quietly.

Luna replied with a surprisingly gentle voice. "She has received that wish. Did she say anything to you about traveling to the Frozen North?"

Sunset thought for a moment. "No..." she said slowly as her mind tried to recall all that Celestia had told her. "She only mentioned it once; something about a Crystal Empire."

Luna echoed her words. "The Crystal Empire? But... that was lost centuries ago."

"She didn't say much," confided Sunset. "She only mentioned some kind of 'failed mission'."

Luna made a thoughtful sound. "One might have called it that. But she has never spoken of that day..."

The clouds broke beneath them abruptly, and Luna cast her gaze towards the ground. A few seconds later, just as Sunset was about to ask another question, she spoke again. "Ah, Ulfrid manages to keep pace after all."

Sunset blinked and looked down as well. They were travelling high above flat plains, liberally sprinkled with small groves of forest. Occasionally she caught a glimpse of a large shadow moving rapidly between two of those groves, which she assumed must have been Ulfrid. He moved quickly when she could see him, but there was something about the distance covered when she couldn't see him that bothered her.

"What's the deal with him, anyway?" asked Sunset. "Why a wolf?"

"Hmm?" asked Luna. "Do you mean Ulfrid?"

"Yeah," replied Sunset, still scanning the ground far below. She considered whether to tell Luna about Ulfrid's visit to the caves, but then decided to hold that for the moment. Instead, she wanted more information about whose side he was on. "What's his story?"

Luna chuckled softly. "He is an enigma, even to me."

Sunset snorted. "I don't believe that," she retorted. "Nightmare Moon wouldn't let anyone she didn't know that close to her. You called him 'dear', I heard you!"

Luna shook her head. "There are precious few in this world that I can still call 'friend', Sunset Shimmer. But Ulfrid is truly one of them. He has earned my trust over many years. He would not betray me."

Sunset found herself thinking back to Ulfrid daintily picking up her dropped cupcake and wishing her a happy birthday. "But... if you don't know him very well," she persisted, "how can you be sure?"

"I am certain," replied Luna firmly.

"But what if he betrayed you?"

"He would not," insisted Luna.

"But..."

Luna interrupted Sunset. "The story would be difficult to summarize. For as long as our flight will be, telling you all the little details that added up would take longer. It would also, I suspect, be a rather dull story. But I will give you some background to pass the time."

Sunset nodded as she caught Luna looking back to her, and Luna gave an additional heavy flap to maintain her forward momentum.

"After Equestria was made secure, I began to hold court in Canterlot Castle. I would hear the comments of the ponies, or more often complaints, and decide whether to do anything about them. He first came to my court after a year or so, when much of the staff began to abandon the castle..."

"That's because you were so strict with everypony," replied Sunset quickly.

"Do not try my patience, Sunset Shimmer," warned Luna.

"I... oh... sorry," replied Sunset.

"You are unusually bold," commented Luna. "Particularly for a pony who spent so long in hiding."

"I... I guess the last few days have just been really intense," Sunset offered.

"Ulfrid was bold, too," commented Luna. "He offered his services, and at first I dismissed him."

*I questioned why a pony such as myself would need any lower species to serve her. He took my dismissal with a nod, and then gave a rather detailed report of the status of various areas of Equestria. Rather than the usual report from the guards, which would generally tell me who was giving them the most trouble, Ulfrid's report was more about the well-being of the ponies and the land itself. He mentioned, almost casually, which areas were low on resources, which areas needed rain, and which areas needed more light. When I demanded to know how he knew all this, he merely bowed and replied, "I serve."*

*That was confusing enough, but then I asked what he would have me do about it. He replied that he only came to inform, not to advise. Then he left.*

*I demanded that my advisors explain to me why I didn't know any of the things that he told me, and they assured me that he was mistaken. But we sent out pegasi to check, and sure enough, everything he reported was true.*

*He arrived again the next month and the process was much the same. Then again, and again. Each report began with an offer to join the staff, and each report ended simply with 'I serve'. Every report was proven accurate and eventually I began to look to his reports to help plan my upcoming months. Some ponies did not like this, but I felt that he was more inclined to be honest with me than they were.*

*Eventually, staffing at the castle was low enough that I told him to go ahead and take whatever job he wanted. I was curious as to what he was actually going to do and honestly, I was tired of the few staff that remained lying to me daily in order to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear.*

*The very next morning, he was waiting by the entrance to the Great Hall. He opened the door as I approached, and briefed me on the day's tasks. He continued to do so moving forward, every day without fail.*

*He began to appear when I was walking the grounds... I didn't do it often, but when I did he would be there. He always seemed to know my mood - he would be silent, or he would speak of trivial things like the organization of the weather patrols for the coming week. Sometimes he even dared to tell a joke. They were always very simple jokes, but they were harmless and his grin was contagious.*

*He also began to organize the monthly audiences. He always knew who was coming and why, and he also took care of fulfilling the needs that I authorized. Even when I was in bad temper, he always did the right thing. We pretended that I didn't know how he resolved my orders, but I think he knew that I knew. He never patronized me, he never questioned my authority, and he never, not even once, he never asked for the sun.*

"Hum," muttered Sunset. "I wonder why so many ponies wanted that..."

Luna cast a frown back towards Sunset, who bit her lip and was silenced. Luna paused a moment, then continued her story.

"One day, without any warning, he appeared on my balcony just behind me..."

*Just like that. I didn't sense him coming nor did I hear him open the door to my chambers. He was just there behind me and when he spoke, I nearly jumped out of my skin. But something about the tone of his voice prevented me from simply attacking. Perhaps even his words.*

*"What answers do you seek from the stars, my liege?"*

*My initial surprise faded quickly, and after a moment, I confided in him.*

Sunset interjected with some curiosity, "What did you tell him?"

"That," replied Luna, "you do not need to know. But we spoke for quite some time. Again, he never actually told me what to do, or what I wanted to hear, but he told me what was..."

Luna paused, searching a moment for the right word. "...true," she finished, finally. "He has become the pony I trust most... though he is not actually a pony."

"I think I understand," replied Sunset slowly. "Although it doesn't really explain where he came from."

"I do not know myself," replied Luna. "He cannot be followed, even my best ponies always lost track of him. Any attempt to ask about his origin or what he does when he's not working is met with casual

dismissals. But I know that his only motivation is to help me with Equestria's needs."

Sunset bit her lip and again thought about Ulfrid visiting the cave. Before she decided what to say, however, Luna spoke to her again.

"And now, Sunset Shimmer, I have answered your question and you must answer one for me. I will not ask for allegiance but you must answer honestly. Are you prepared to do what I ask of you in order to bring Celestia under control?"

Sunset frowned. "I won't hurt her."

Luna clicked her tongue. "I would be surprised if you could. But I am not foolish enough to expect that of you. My plan is much simpler. When we locate her, I will send you on ahead. You will attempt to determine what she is trying to do and get her to agree to meet. If you cannot, you shall retreat."

"What if I warn her that you're coming?"

Luna chuckled at that. "I am sending you to tell her that I am coming. I am hoping that she will see you as less of a threat than if I were to face her first. Furthermore, it would be advantageous if we could defuse any potential situation before the guard arrives."

Sunset nodded, slowly. "I'll try."

"Good," responded Luna. "Look, the Crystal Mountains are ahead."

Sunset looked ahead and saw the gleaming peaks of the Crystal Mountains ahead on the horizon, catching the moonlight with both crystal and snow. Beyond that, she knew, was the Frozen North - a vast wasteland of ice and snow.

"Princess," she ventured. "Why would Celestia be going to the Frozen North? It sounded like you had an idea."

Luna frowned. "I do not know. But if it is related to our past experiences in the Crystal Empire, then she is not thinking clearly. It was she who determined that the Empire was lost in the first place."

Something in Luna's tone made Sunset hesitate to question that statement. They soared on in silence. Every so often Sunset caught a glimpse of Ulfrid below, darting from one obstruction to the next. Eventually the foothills to the mountains raced beneath them, and then the gleaming peaks of the mountains themselves rose to greet their flight. Less frequently now, Sunset still saw the distant shadow below, darting

between trees, rocks, and ice, somehow keeping pace even through the advanced terrain.

Sunset lifted her head and strained to see forward towards the distant horizon once again. She saw the peaks thin in the distance, and then thought that her eyes must be playing tricks on her. There was an orange glow on the horizon, just faintly visible over the curve of the Earth. After a few minutes she was certain, and she spoke up.

"Princess...?"

"Yes, Sunset Shimmer?" replied Luna.

"Do you... do you see that glow on the horizon?"

Luna paused, and then nodded. "Yes... I do see it."

Sunset bit her lip, afraid to ask the question that burned in her mind, afraid to sound too hopeful with Luna still carrying her. At last, however, she did. "Is... that Celestia?"

Luna exhaled slowly. "It must be," she replied slowly.

"Is she... is she raising the sun?"

Luna glanced above herself to confirm, and then shook her head. "Not with the moon still up, no. But I am not sure what she is doing." She angled her wings to slow and then began spiraling downwards. "Let us ask Ulfrid if he senses anything."

"He has magic, too?" asked Sunset with surprise. "I never read about a wolf with magic."

"Ulfrid is more than he seems to be," replied Luna. "I would have thought that my story would have illuminated that for you."

*"That's the same thing Celestia said,"* thought Sunset.

Sunset glanced down and noticed that Luna was heading for a notch in the mountains lined with both ice and crystal, carefully gliding between the sharp peaks. Ulfrid was standing ankle-deep in the snow between two large crystals as Luna alighted on the narrow path, and he bowed his head in recognition. "My liege," he commented, his voice oddly strained.

"Ulfrid," began Luna, "there is a bright glow on the horizon. We wondered if you had any insight?"

As Ulfrid lifted his head, both Luna and Sunset gasped. The wolf looked as though he had aged immensely. His muzzle had gone grey and his eyes were glowing and featureless. His coat had thinned and in places an inner glow was exposed. His expression was one of intense pain.

*"She cuts too deep..."* he warned, every word an effort. *"I cannot hold it back."*

Luna dumped Sunset unceremoniously into the snow and ran to Ulfrid, stopping just short of touching him. "Ulfrid! What is it? How can I help?"

*"Restore the heart... restore the bonds..."*

Luna's eyes widened and her horn lit as she attempted a healing spell. "Relax, my friend. I will heal you. Sit still!"

Ulfrid looked over to her, and the bright glow in his eyes faded, leaving them looking old and sad. *"My... liege..."* he strained. *"I can serve no longer."*

There was a whisper of wind through the narrow pass, and Ulfrid simply dissolved into it, blowing away like ash on the breeze.

Sunset sat up and watched the last of this, and then watched as Luna stormed forward down the pass, shouting. "ULFRID! ULFRID!!" Sunset got to her hooves and ran after her, having a little more trouble with the deep snow. She cast her own magic forward to get any sense of where the wolf might have gone, but sensed nothing.

As she passed the spot where Ulfrid had disappeared, she noticed no indentation in the snow.

Nearly fifteen minutes later Sunset finally caught up to Luna, who was sitting in the snow, hunched over with her back to Sunset. She was crying. Sunset froze, uncertain how to respond to this. At last she took a hesitant step forward. "Princess Luna?" she called, as gently as she could.

"Go home, Sunset Shimmer." Luna's voice broke as she barked out the order between breaths, without turning to face her.

"Princess..." responded Sunset softly. "I... I can't. And I... I won't."

Luna turned towards her. Her face was contorted with hurt and anger and the tears were still running down her cheeks, with hints of ice crystal starting to form in the bitter wind. "It's OVER," she snarled, stalking towards her. "Don't you SEE that? EVERY pony has abandoned me! EVERY pony has given up on me! I failed! I failed YEARS ago! And the last thing that was holding Equestria together just... he just..."

Sunset planted her hooves and held her ground. "He left you a job to do," she said flatly.

Luna stopped, and just looked at her. Sunset continued.

"And I'm still here. I'm not here because you arrested me and not because I'm worried about Celestia, although I am. But I'm here because I screwed up and I'm finally ready to fix it."

Sunset had started slow, but her words picked up as she continued. "I had the luxury of ten years to wallow in self-pity, and a kick in the tail to get me started. But you don't get that. You don't get that because you're a Princess, and not just any Princess, but the ruler of Equestria. That means you have a job to do, and if you have time afterwards, *then* you can feel sorry for yourself."

Sunset took a step forward, and raised a hoof. "And you know what else, that whole thing about everypony abandoning you is a load of horse apples! I know for a fact that Sterling Honor would do literally *anything* just for your approval, because he believes in you. He manages an entire... whatever you call a group of guard ponies who are all serving you because they *want* to."

"But is that all this is?" demanded Sunset further. "Is it just a big continuation of your tantrum from a thousand years ago? Because I read your diary! I know Celestia was a big mule to you, but that was a thousand years ago! Right now, your sister is just over the horizon doing Celestia-knows-what, and you're just going to stop and give up? We are *SO CLOSE TO ENDING THIS!*"

Luna just stood there, caught off guard by the outburst. "Sunset Shimmer..." she said, and her expression wavered between guilt and anger.

Sunset lowered her hoof, and leaned forward earnestly. "She *loves* you," she insisted. "And she needs your help. And Equestria needs your help. And Ulfrid wanted you to do this. And... and I'm really cold. Can we *please TRY?*"

Luna managed a small smile as a single final tear made its way down her frosted cheek. "You have great passion, Sunset Shimmer. I can see what my sister saw in you." She looked up into the darkened sky and searched for just a moment before speaking again. "You're right," she said finally. "I promised Ulfrid I would try. We shall continue now."

Luna spread her wings and lit her horn to lift Sunset onto her back again. Another flash of magic wiped the frozen tears from her cheeks as she crouched for takeoff. Before she jumped, however, she turned her head back towards Sunset.

"Celestia-knows'?" she asked with a hint of amusement.

Sunset blushed. "That might not have been the best choice of words."

Luna leapt into the air and flapped her wings as they caught the stiff mountain wind. "We shall see," she replied.

## Chapter 30 – Starry Night

*Nightmare Moon stood at the edge of her private balcony, which looked over the mountains from the gleaming white spires of Canterlot Castle. Her mane flowed majestically on the gentle night breeze as she studied the stars in the sky above her. She belonged to the night and the night respected her will, but this did not mean that she owned it. Her eyes moved slowly from one bright point to another, searching the emptiness between them. She could see far more than any normal pony could. She saw the distant stars too faint to light Canterlot, and she saw the far-off galaxies and the mysterious clouds of colored gas. For all that she could see she still searched.*

*"What answers do you seek from the stars, my liege?"*

*Nightmare Moon started at the sudden voice. Her magic reached out and quickly confirmed her initial suspicion that it belonged to the wolf who had been helping out around the castle - Ulfrid. She was surprised that he had again managed to approach without her notice. She regained her composure quickly so that she could take her time in responding.*

*"I think that the stars owe me some answers..." she responded, smirking.*

*Ulfrid's voice came back level, but Nightmare Moon thought she sensed a smile behind the words all the same. "Do the stars not bend to your will already, Highness?"*

*Nightmare Moon turned her head and looked directly at the wolf. "And how is it that you come to my tower, creep through my room, and arrive at my own balcony without my notice?"*

*Ulfrid bowed and spoke gently. "No intrusion was intended, my liege. I serve."*

*"So you are fond of saying," mused Nightmare Moon, turning her attention skyward once again. "I trust that you are well?"*

*"Aye, Highness, I am quite well, thank you."*

*"And you have completed your rounds for the evening?"*

*"Aye, I shall circle again in an hour or so. But for now the White City sleeps peacefully."*

*"But as always, you shall not sleep?"*

*"Nay, Highness. I do not need to rest tonight."*

*Ulfrid sat and waited patiently. After a few minutes, Nightmare spoke again, without turning her head from the sky.*

*"Do you think that I am ruling Equestria well, Ulfrid?"*

*Ulfrid responded in his usual gentle voice. "It is not for me to judge, my liege."*

*"But why not?" asked Nightmare, her head turning down and her eyes locking onto the wolf. "Everypony in Equestria has had time to judge me. Do you simply fear my response?"*

*Ulfrid bowed low, "Of course not, Your Highness."*

*Nightmare made a thoughtful sound and frowned. "Rise, then. I order you to speak openly."*

*Ulfrid stood again and smiled just a little. "Of course I will, but what would you have me say?"*

*Nightmare's frown deepened. "I have already told you to speak your mind."*

*Ulfrid dipped his head just a little. "If Her Majesty were to ask me of any issue known to me throughout the land of Equestria, I would be happy to speak all that I know. But I am not here to speak of my own opinions, for I have none."*

*"Then why ARE you here?" demanded Nightmare as she leaned closer to Ulfrid and spread her wings threateningly.*

*"I serve," replied the wolf simply, his head still lowered.*

*Nightmare snorted and stomped, chipping the concrete beneath her hoof. "That is all you ever say," she complained. Ulfrid did not flinch, but simply raised his head to meet her gaze calmly. At last Nightmare snorted and turned away again. She looked out over the land, keeping her wings spread wide. Her eyes scanned from Canterlot to the horizon as she surveyed her kingdom.*

*"Fine, then," she began anew. "Tell me instead what my citizens think of me."*

*"A difficult question," replied Ulfrid. "Opinions vary widely. I could not claim to know every heart, but much of what I have heard concerns fear and frustration. Many find it difficult to do the things that they once enjoyed, and even if they have what they need to survive they are concerned about long term stability."*

*Nightmare Moon closed her wings slowly. Although Ulfrid could not see her face, her frown softened and her eyes creased slightly. "So," she responded. "They do hate me."*

*"It is not so simple as that, Your Highness," responded Ulfrid. "There are those who adore you, but there are many more who simply fear you, or more correctly, they fear not knowing what you will choose to do. Those who would openly oppose you have been driven into hiding, but those who simply want life to return to normal remain the majority."*

*"You mean to return the Sun?" asked Nightmare with a hint of annoyance.*

*"Many would applaud that move, my liege," responded Ulfrid.*

*Nightmare shook her head. "I swore that Eternal Night shall cover these lands. So long as one pony remains who denies the night to wait for the sunrise I shall not allow it to return."*

*"There may be other things that you may order which would ease the lives of your citizens, Your Highness."*

*"Such as?"*

*"Many traditional crops do not perform as well under moonlight as they would with a little more light. Improving the yields of these crops would both relieve the food stresses in some areas and provide more comfort food to the ponies."*

*"More light?" asked Nightmare Moon. "And how would I do that? I cannot simply brighten the Moon into a second Sun."*

*Ulfrid shook his head. "That I cannot advise, but perhaps there is a more direct solution available to your magic. There are also the feelings of fear. To relax that would offer tremendous relief for many ponies."*

*Nightmare turned back towards Ulfrid. "How do I do that? I do not even know what it is that they fear!"*

*Ulfrid bowed as he replied. "With apologies, Highness, the list is large, but I would suggest three main areas worthy of attention. They fear the monsters of the night that now roam the lands freely where once they were contained. They fear the uncertainty of leadership that they cannot see. But the largest fear they have is the fear that they may not speak."*

*"Of course they may speak," snapped Nightmare. "I did not order silence across the land."*

*"Nay," responded Ulfrid. "But should they speak the wrong words, the Royal Guard has been known to arrest them on the spot. Furthermore, the Guard has not had a history of gentle handling."*

*"What do you suggest, Ulfrid? We cannot allow treason!"*

*"I do not mean to instruct, Highness," responded Ulfrid as he rose once again. "But 'tis not treason to complain of the darkness when one wishes to see, nor to recall a fond memory even if the sun was up whilst it occurred."*

*Nightmare turned away again and stepped closer to the edge of the balcony. Again her eyes scanned from Canterlot to the horizon, and then scanned across it. Ulfrid waited without a further word as she searched deep across the darkened land. Here and there a light flickered and her eyes would hold on that light for a moment, to see if she might see any hint of that pony's actions. She could not, of course; the lights were mere points and although she could see to the stars and beyond, that talent extended only to the night sky. Five, then ten, then fifteen minutes passed before she sighed deeply.*

*"I could offer limited magic to light the fields," she mused, very softly. "Not enough to brighten the sky, but perhaps enough to help the crops. Two orders for the guard: first to drive the monsters back to where they belong, and second to permit unrestricted speech once again. Would that be enough?"*

*"I do not see the future, my liege," responded Ulfrid. "But it would seem to be a good place to start."*

*Nightmare turned back towards him and smirked. "That sounds almost like an opinion, Ulfrid."*

*Ulfrid managed a toothy grin in response. "I speak only what appears to be true, to the best of my ability to determine it."*

*Nightmare hummed and looked back up to the sky again. "'Appears to be true'," she echoed. "To many ponies, that is the very definition of an opinion."*

*There was silence between them again for several minutes, as Nightmare studied the glow of the moon.*

*"When I was trapped in the moon," she began, "time did not pass normally for me. I had only limited ability to recognize reality, and I was often forced to relive my last thoughts before being imprisoned. I would not say my own now, but I wonder what Celestia's thoughts were, what she is being forced to relive."*

*"I could not say, my liege," replied Ulfrid. "But... it is within your power to return her and find out."*

*Nightmare dipped her head and looked at the balcony beneath her hooves. "I dare not," she replied. "If she felt any of the rage that I felt, it will have been echoing in her mind for years now. She would most certainly destroy me."*

*"But she might not?" asked Ulfrid.*

*Nightmare paused and then shook her head. "I will not take that chance. I promised Eternal Night and there is no need to return my sister. I will correct these issues on my own."*

*Ulfrid bowed low once again, and then nodded. "Of course, Your Majesty. Shall I leave you to your planning?"*

*Nightmare paused to consider for a moment. "No," she responded at last, "you may stay for now. And should you choose to offer advice in the future," she added, "I would be very interested in hearing it..."*

## Chapter 31 – Winds of Change

Once dismissed, Sterling turned to leave and cast a quick glance at Ulfrid on his way out. The wolf was already getting to his paws as Luna addressed him, and Sterling frowned.

*"The amulet had one thing right," he thought. "I should have been there as advisor, not the wolf. But that ship has sailed."*

There were tapestries of Princess Luna in the city, of course, tucked away in distant corners that didn't see the need to replace them when Nightmare Moon returned. But he hadn't taken a good look at her before - and seeing the armor made him realize just how different she looked from Nightmare Moon.

The size change was striking... he still had to look up a little bit, but she no longer towered as she once did. Then there was her color - no longer midnight black but a deep blue instead. The scorched armor was nearly black against her coat - a bizarre inversion of the colors he was accustomed to. Were it not for her cutie mark - changed in shade but still much the same - he would have suspected trickery.

But her eyes... no longer the deep reptilian green that so captivated him, they had become rather normal. They were now large with cyan irises, and betraying hints of uncertainty. She was not the pony that he had served for so long.

But that doubt also wavered as he watched her. She wore the armor with poise and confidence. The orders she barked out were every bit as certain and deliberate as he remembered. Even in this time of crisis she was in charge and nopony was questioning it. She was even wearing her helmet - she may have become Princess Luna but she was Nightmare Moon ready for war.

He shook his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts and galloped down the rest of the stairs. He exited the tower and navigated the streets quickly to reach his office. Upon entering, he crossed the office directly and opened his wardrobe where he went through his affects until he located a well-polished saber and scabbard. He withdrew them and, after checking the blade, strapped the scabbard to the side of his uniform. A saber would not be very helpful against an alicorn, but he was about to lead a platoon into battle and it was his duty to be properly outfitted.

He stopped at the mirror to check his uniform and then stopped abruptly as he caught a look at himself. He looked more tired than he

could recall ever seeing himself, and creases lined the area around his eyes. For a longer moment than he would usually stop he held to really look at himself.

*"The amulet..."* he thought, and then paused. He looked towards the safe in the corner where it had been stored until he had taken it out for the Everfree mission. As his eyes came back to the mirror he sighed softly. *"The amulet did this to me,"* he mused. *"What would it have done if I'd been allowed to let it continue? I was a fool."*

His mind drifted back and he considered that first afternoon with the amulet. *"It all seemed so right, didn't it? But I guess it would have. If I'm to be completely honest, it only told me what I wanted to hear. I wonder what else has seemed like such a good idea that I barely questioned it..."*

A second thought came to him, causing some concern. *"I wonder what it is telling the Solar Princess to do..."*

He frowned and used his horn to correct a wrinkle in his uniform and then straightened his helmet. *"There is no time to dwell on that now. The stakes are too high to let myself be distracted."*

He turned his attention to the large map of Equestria on the far wall. Using his magic he picked up a yardstick and measured out various distances from the castle to the mountains in the north.

*"By midnight,"* he mused. *"It's too far to run. It should take Her Majesty about three hours to fly..."*

He began counting off the distances along various routes, finally settling on the railroad.

*"It takes us out of our way... but, it can get us to the mountains in five and a half hours. If we press them to top speed we might be able to do it in fewer than five. But it will take another two hours at a fast trot to meet with a direct line from Canterlot Castle..."*

He suddenly realized that he didn't know the exact point they needed to meet with the Queen. After a moment of evaluation he shook his head.

*"We just have to get close. She'll give us some kind of beacon when we get there. She'll have to."*

But then he paused again and turned his gaze up to the ornate painting of Nightmare Moon. He stared into her eyes as he had done so many times before. *"Why did she say that part about having fallen before we get there...? She's not you, but... she is. Are you afraid?"*

He searched the painting's eyes for a full minute, but again she had no reply for him. Finally he set his jaw.

*"You are still the Queen of Equestria. I will not let you down."*

He turned back to the map and made several more measurements before levitating a notebook and quill and writing down some notes. He then set down the yardstick and put the notebook in his saddlebag before heading towards the door. He paused one last time to verify his uniform and then set out. Again he navigated the streets at a gallop, this time making his way to the parade square. There was a flurry of activity, with guard ponies in every state of readiness: some checking their weapons and some still putting on their armor.

Sterling stopped before fully entering the square and watched them. *"They still have ten minutes,"* he reminded himself. *"It will do no good to rush them."*

It took about eight minutes, by Sterling's reckoning, until the ponies were lining up in their ranks. By this time he had figured out what he wanted to say. He stepped out into the square and instantly he heard Sergeant Impulse's coarse order for attention. Four squads of ponies snapped smartly to attention. He scanned the ranks with an expert eye, looking for anything out of place. He didn't expect to find anything, but this was no ordinary hike. At last he stepped forward to speak.

"I don't expect that all of you know why you're here," he began.

**"To defend the moon, sir!"** they shouted back in unison, interrupting him. He waved a hoof to indicate they should settle down. It was a common phrase during basic training, but he hadn't expected them to shout it now. It made him smile.

"You will need that enthusiasm," he replied, "for you are not in basic training anymore. This is the real thing. Most of you have probably heard rumors. I'm going to give you facts, and they are the only facts you will retain about this mission."

"Listen up. Our mission is to travel to the Frozen North beyond the Crystal Mountains. Once there, we will be backing up the Queen as she battles the Solar Princess, Celestia."

He paused to listen for gasps or any other lack of discipline. Besides a few shuffles there was nothing, so he continued.

"Some of you joined me on a similar mission to the Everfree Forest, but at that time we were working with uncertain intelligence. This time there is no uncertainty. Celestia has absolutely returned and she is hostile."

"Furthermore she has already attacked the castle, as many of you are aware. Our Queen's power has been diminished, but her spirit has not. She is already in the air and in pursuit for the defense of Equestria. Our job is to make sure that she has the power that she needs to succeed. If her magic fails, our might will not."

He paused to let that sink in, casting his eyes across the squads. There were a few uncertain faces but most of them looked ready, even eager.

"A forced march would take too long," he continued. "So we will commandeer the train and take it as far as the Crystal Mountain stop. From there it should take no more than an hour at forced gallop to reach the rendezvous point."

He knew that it wasn't true, but he also knew that they couldn't maintain a forced gallop in the heavy snow of the Frozen North. At best they might manage a trot which would double the time, but if the ponies were prepared to gallop then they could take advantage of any clear paths that they might find.

"Pegasi will fly ahead and secure the rendezvous site. The rest of you will proceed with Sergeant Impulse to the train station and secure your equipment. We will leave as soon as I arrive."

His eyes passed slowly over all four squads and he spoke with dire seriousness. "Get what rest you can on the journey - pegasi, you should have about an hour once you reach the rendezvous point. We won't be resting again until the threat is contained. Those are the orders of our Queen."

"Do you understand?" he shouted once again.

"Sir, yes Sir!" responded the squads in unison.

He nodded. "Sergeant Impulse!"

The Sergeant stamped his hoof and reasserted his attention stance, following with a sharp salute. "Sir!" he responded.

"Move them out, Sergeant," responded Sterling. "I will join you after I have briefed the pegasi."

Impulse nodded and saluted once again. "Yes Sir!" he turned immediately to face the squads, commanding them to prepare to move out. Sterling Honor turned his attention away and trotted over to stand in front of the squad of pegasi who still stood at attention.

"Corporal Misty Fly!" he shouted.

A pale olive filly with a pale blue mane stamped her hoof. "Sir!" she shouted back.

Sterling looked to her as he levitated the notebook from his saddlebag and passed it to her. "You will lead the pegasi to the rendezvous point and secure the area. Send scouts to verify the surrounding terrain and in particular determine the location of the Solar Princess, if you can. Should you encounter the Queen, be aware that she has reverted in appearance to that of the Lunar Princess of old."

Misty looked confused for a moment as she took the notebook with her wings. "Reverted, Sir?"

Sterling nodded. "As a result of the attack by the Solar Princess, some of her magic has been drained. But you are to treat her as you always would have and offer any assistance she requests. However, and this is important, short of an order from the Queen you are not to abandon the rendezvous point. Celestia is extremely powerful and you will wait for support. Is that clear?"

Misty paused for a moment as she looked down at the notebook. "It's going to take us about four and a half hours to fly this far, Sir."

Sterling nodded. "I know. Those of us who can't fly will take the train and then cut across from the Crystal Mountain Station to meet you. We should join you within roughly an hour of your arrival."

Misty frowned, paused, and then nodded. She raised her hoof in a sharp salute. "I understand, Sir!"

"Good," responded Sterling. He turned and shouted again. "Corporal Stratosphere, you will come with me."

"What?" came Stratosphere's reply from somewhere near the back. It was quickly followed by a stamp and a more solid response. "Sir! Yes Sir!"

Sterling smirked. He turned to Misty. "Good luck, Corporal." He raised his muzzle and shouted again. "Stratosphere! To me."

He turned and started to walk to the center of the parade square. Behind him he heard Misty taking charge. "Pegasi! Wings up! Ready!"

He vaguely heard the sound of somepony trotting to catch up to him before the sound was drowned out. Misty shouted, "Launch!", and the rushing sound of thirty-one pairs of wings momentarily filled the air.

Sterling turned his head to find Corporal Stratosphere had caught up to him.

"Man, dude. I wish I was going with them. Um, sir."

"Sorry Corporal, but I need your eyes. You'll be escorting the train and keeping a watch out for any threats. Stay high and out of sight, and if you spot anything, come report directly to me. I'll be in the locomotive where I can keep an eye out myself, as well as motivate the engineer."

Stratosphere seemed a little happier with this order, and his hoof snapped up in an enthusiastic and somewhat sloppy salute. "Yes sir!"

"All right then," responded Sterling, frowning just a little. "To the skies, Corporal! Dismissed!"

Stratosphere nodded once and crouched, his wings flipping out much more sharply than his hoof had come up to salute. He shot upwards with a single spring, leaving a cloud of dust behind him. Sterling tilted his head upwards to watch, but the pegasus was quickly lost to the dark sky.

*"I can't decide whether to keep him or lose him," mused Sterling. "But while we have him, we might as well use him. There are certainly no better eyes in Equestria."*

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Commandeering the train for their mission had led to some protest from the conductor, and some quiet muttering from those passengers who had already begun to board. But with the bulk of Canterlot's guard on hand to expedite it, it had not taken very long. In fact, Sterling was rather proud of the way it had been handled. No pony had been hurt, and he even observed some passengers' luggage being offloaded. True that some of it had been forcefully hurled off the train, but it was efficient and better than not having your suitcase at all.

His eyes turned towards the engineer who shared the locomotive's engine room. He was a greying earth pony who sat staring forwards with his lips tightly pursed. He had expressed considerable frustration at being forced to drive so far but he managed the powerful steam engine with obvious expertise and had prepared the train in very short order. Between his coloration, his efficiency, and even his tight-lipped silence, Sterling found himself fondly comparing the conductor to his own grandfather.

*"He is the only pony who we truly put out of his way," considered Sterling. "But he should be proud to help support the Queen. Is a few hours of his time so much to ask?"*

"Can we go faster?" asked Sterling, as politely as he could manage.

"Ah told ya the last durn time ya asked!" snapped the engineer. "We cain't go no faster!"

"It's critical," insisted Sterling. "We must support the Queen!"

"Ah want to get there bad as you do, and get y'all off my durn train! But if we derail, ain't neither of us getting what we want."

Sterling couldn't argue with that, and the two of them sat there in stony silence, watching the rails approach in the light of the train's headlamp. After twenty minutes or so, the engineer spoke again, more softly and with a hint of curiosity.

"What's she doin' way up there?"

Sterling blinked and then looked back towards him. The engineer was still staring forwards. "I can't tell you that," responded Sterling.

"Yup, figured that," replied the engineer. "It's all about secrets with this one, ain't it?"

Sterling frowned. "What do you mean?"

The engineer sneered. "Cain't tell ya that," he responded mockingly, and then went quiet again. After a waiting for a few moments, Sterling sighed and watched the rails again.

It was another forty-five minutes before the engineer spoke again, as the train was rounding a large sweeping bend, turning away from the lights of a small town off in the distance ahead.

"Means she's scared," he said, right out of the blue. Sterling jumped.

"Scared?" he responded, after regaining his composure. "She is the Queen of all Equestria and has ruled unopposed for over a decade."

The engineer chuckled. "Wasn't quite unopposed now, was it? But ah guess I'll give ya that there was no serious challenge. But she ain't scared in that way."

Sterling spoke carefully. He was bored of sitting silently and wanted to pass the time, rather than have the engineer snap away into silence again. "What way do you mean, then?"

"Well," began the engineer. "I'm old. I remember when Celestia raised the sun every morning. Wasn't that long ago anyhow. But y'know what else she did?"

Sterling frowned. "No, what else did she do?"

The engineer met his gaze and spoke meaningfully. "She raised the moon." He paused for a moment, and then continued. "Oh, it wasn't never as pretty as we got now, but she wasn't afraid to do it. She locked up Nightmare Moon but she kept raisin' the moon in tribute to her sister.

She wasn't afraid some pony was gonna say that the sun was any less cause the moon got half the day."

"Her... sister?" Sterling blinked in confusion. "Do you mean..."

The engineer interrupted him, his voice full of impatience. "Didn't ya listen t' yer mother, boy? Don't ya remember the old mare's tales? Y'know Princess Luna became Nightmare Moon, don'cha?!"

Sterling blinked, caught off guard. Fragments of the old legends came to his mind, but even stronger was the striking recent image of seeing Princess Luna wearing Nightmare Moon's armor, scorched nearly black in contrast to her striking blue coat. He found it difficult to form a meaningful reply, managing only an abbreviated response. "Well... yes."

The engineer nodded. "Well, there ya go then!" His eyes drifted forward to the track again, and he spoke more gently. "I always loved the night. It's quiet, and once I got into the railroad, I spent a lot of time just watching it roll by. So I used t'think about Princess Luna a lot, and wondering whether she was okay up there in the moon. It was all before even my time, o'course. But I figure she just got confused. Happens when yer young. Then ya get scared, cause ya made a mistake and y'don't know how to fix it. Nightmare Moon's her way of hidin' from it."

Sterling did not reply, just quietly watching the engineer as he watched the track in front of him. Sterling could nearly see the memories washing over the old pony.

When the engineer spoke again, it was very soft. "Ah wish we had Princess Luna back. She shouldn't need to be scared of fixing a mistake."

Sterling smiled knowingly. "You never know," he responded.

The engineer looked surprised and was quiet for a moment. Then he snorted and laughed. "Getting' all sentimental here! We got a long ride ahead of us yet! Why don't ya dig in that lockbox in front of ya? I got a little stash of cider. Pass me one and take one for yerself! We might as well pass the time!"

Sterling opened the indicated cabinet and extracted two bottles of cider, labelled 'Sweet Apple Acres'. He passed one to the engineer with his magic and opened the other, surprised at the rich fragrance that came out of the bottle. "Thank you," he responded, surprised at how much he was looking forward to it.

The engineer nodded. "Think nothin' of it!" He popped the cork from his own bottle and took a deep drink. "That's the good stuff there," he indicated, and smiled.

"I think you're smart," he added. "But you're still young too. Don't you be forgetting that."

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The ride was more pleasant with the conversation and the company that the engineer provided now that the ice was broken. Sterling had also gone back through the train to check on his troops twice. By this time they were entering the foothills of the Crystal Mountains. It would take less than an hour to get over the pass and then they would be able to embark on the next phase of the journey.

He had paused between cars to watch the glimmering hills begin to roll past the side of the train when he was distracted by the clatter of hooves on the roof above him. He looked up.

"Captain!" shouted Stratosphere. "You've got to stop the train, dude! The pass is closed!"

Sterling finally found Stratosphere's goggled face peeking down from above the next car, where the pegasus had landed on the roof. The wind whipped Stratosphere's mane around his head where it caught the dim glow from the crystals around them. Sterling wondered about the mandatory short mane policy as he replied. "What are you talking about, Corporal?"

"Sorry dude, er, sir! There's been an avalanche like a mile up the track! You can't get through it, you have to stop!"

Sterling snapped to attention. "Thank you, Corporal! Stay near the train." He turned and ran the rest of the way back the locomotive.

Sterling shouted to the engineer as he ran into the engine room. "We need to slow down NOW!"

"Slow down?" replied the engineer. "Weren't you all bothered 'bout going faster?"

Sterling nodded rapidly. "There's been an avalanche a mile ahead. We need to slow the train down!"

The engineer's eyes widened and he immediately reached for the knobs that controlled the steam pressure. He moved quickly and expertly, leaving Sterling with no doubt whatsoever that the old pony knew exactly what to do. "Mile ahead, y'say? You reckon that with yer unicorn magic?"

Sterling shook his head. "No, my pegasus scout has been watching the train from the air." He could feel the train slowing as the outbursts of extra steam made roaring blasts of noise.

The engineer made a thoughtful sound and reached for another knob, and the headlamp in front of the train brightened. "Good 'nuff for me," he muttered. He stretched his body upwards to try and see further along the track, and Sterling looked forward as well.

It didn't take long before they could see bits of ice and crystal debris scattered across the track, and the engineer slowed the train even more. Then the headlamp illuminated a large heap of mountain that had simply come down and buried the track, and he pulled the brake.

"Well," he muttered, "there it is. Durn glad y'had eyes in the sky on this one."

Sterling nodded. "Thank you," he noted. "We'll see what we can do about it."

He went back to the next car where he practically ran into Sergeant Impulse.

"Sir!" The Sergeant stamped his hoof and came to attention. "We're stopped, Sir! What's wrong?"

Sterling nodded. "The rails are blocked," he noted. "I need you to get every hoof out there working on clearing these rails. Put the earth ponies in charge of groups - managing the land is your domain - and use the unicorns however makes the most sense. We can't afford this delay, so we need to make it as short as we can."

It took just ten minutes to get the ponies off the train and to work. The unicorns were put to work moving the top of the debris while the earth ponies below dug and shoveled. The larger earth ponies were put to work smashing the larger boulders into more manageable pieces. Sterling watched for a moment with Sergeant Impulse beside him before turning.

"Where do you want me, Sergeant?"

Sergeant Impulse blinked in surprise. "Sir! You... oh... we've got this sir! You don't have to trouble yourself."

"I said 'every hoof', Sergeant, and that includes..." Sterling broke off as he caught a motion in the shadowed woods behind the train. As he watched, he thought that he saw a pair of eyes turn towards him, nod, and turn away.

"Sir?" prompted Sergeant Impulse.

"Keep working," ordered Sterling. "I need to check something in the woods."

Impulse turned back and looked to the woods, but didn't seem to see anything. "The woods, Sir?"

"It's all right," replied Sterling. "I'll be right back."

Impulse looked uncertain a moment longer, then nodded. "Oh, right! Yes Sir!"

Sterling uttered an exasperated sigh, but chose not to press the point. He trotted towards the point that the eyes had appeared to be, and looked around carefully. Though there was a light dusting of snow, he didn't see any evidence that anypony had been here.

As he turned his head around, he saw the eyes again - this time further in. His thoughts immediately went to stories of the Everfree Forest and being lured in too far. But there was something about the shape of that shadow that he recognized. He lit his horn, both to see and to subtly unclasp his saber, and then went closer.

The eyes flickered out as he drew near, but as he looked around himself he was startled to see the shadowed outline of a large, dark-furred wolf right beside him. He jumped, nearly drawing his saber before recognition set in.

"Ulfrid!" he hissed. "You are supposed to be with the Queen! What is the meaning of this?"

Ulfrid's eyes were barely visible, a dim yellow surrounded by a shadow that Sterling had trouble making out. He wobbled slightly, and then his outline actually flickered. "One last task..." he muttered, barely audible. Sterling blinked.

"What is wrong with you, wolf?"

Ulfrid's eyes closed and he lowered his head towards the ground. At last he spoke, but his voice was thin and other-worldly. "There is no time," he hissed.

Sterling stepped closer. "What do you...?" he started to ask. He was interrupted as Ulfrid's head snapped upwards again, his eyes shining with an intense white light.

"No time!" repeated the wolf. He roared as he launched into a predatory leap with jaws wide. Sterling snapped into a defensive posture but Ulfrid was too close to avoid. As the wolf slammed into him what little light Sterling had left vanished.

## Chapter 32 – Coalescing Shadows

Sunset squinted ahead into the wind as Luna's wings sliced through the bitterly cold air. Her horn glowed faintly, keeping her attached to the alicorn's back. The orange glow from the horizon was rising over the peaks ahead, growing bright enough to light the snow beneath them.

"Princess?" asked Sunset.

"Hmm?" replied Luna.

"I know you said it's not the sun... but what is it? It's getting too bright for me to look directly at it."

"It's Celestia," replied Luna, who was staring directly into the light without squinting. "She is channeling enough magic that she is giving off the glow you see. It's looping to the earth. I've been trying to discern why."

Sunset squinted forward, but she could not look towards the intense orange light without it hurting her eyes. "How can you look at that?" she asked. Luna merely grunted in reply.

After a moment Luna started to bank and then descended in a long, sweeping spiral. "We should pause here," she commented. "It would be dangerous for us to get too much closer without understanding what she is trying to do."

They touched down about a half mile away from the glow, and Sunset hopped off Luna's back as the alicorn lighted atop the snow. As Sunset's hooves pushed through the icy crust she yelped. "It's deep here," she complained. "The snow is nearly up to my chest!"

Luna seemed uninterested in the complaint. "Do you feel it, Sunset Shimmer?"

"Huh?" Sunset paused for a moment to let her senses focus on something other than the icy snow surrounding her legs. After a moment, she did. "The ground!"

Luna nodded. "Yes. She is feeding all that power into the ground. I do not think it would be wise to send you ahead."

"But why?" mused Sunset Shimmer. "Directed magic like that, it's like she's trying to break something...? What is going on?"

"She draws from the land, too..." mused Luna, suddenly sounding distracted. Her eyes focused, however, as she watched the

distant scene intensely. "She's wobbling..." Luna added with sudden concern.

Sunset turned back towards Celestia, squinting her eyes as she tried to see into the light. "What?" she asked, her own concern leaking through. Before she could get her hoof up to block the light there was a sudden flash, followed quickly by a loud bang. Sunset's eyes slammed shut against the light and she heard a gasp from Luna followed by a massive rush of wind and feathers.

Sunset opened her eyes to find the area much darker than it had been a moment earlier, and she cast her gaze northward to see an orange ember falling from the sky, only to vanish as it hit the snow.

"Princess!" she cried. She looked around and saw that Luna had already taken to the sky and was rushing towards the fallen ember. Sunset tried to run, but the deep snow made it impossible. After a few hopping steps she lit her horn and considered.

*"I can't wink... it's too far and I've never seen that site anyway. I could levitate over the snow, but probably not that far. Maybe..."*

She concentrated for a moment, and large glowing snowshoes appeared at the ends of her hooves. She was able to stand atop the snow with them and after spending a moment to gain her balance, she started off at a quick trot.

*"She must have overloaded...! I've never read anything about what you're supposed to do."*

She glanced up at the sky. It was difficult to make out Princess Luna against the dark sky, but she could see that Luna was well ahead of her and would probably reach the site in seconds. She looked ahead again and estimated it was going to take herself another four to five minutes at her current rate. She wracked her brain as she considered the medical guides she had studied during her exile from magical training.

*"It's often described as burning out... would literal burn aid help? She had too much power... would it be the same as a magical myorrhexis? Hyperkinesia...?"*

She at last began to draw near and saw that Luna had already landed and was facing Sunset's approach, crouching on the other side of Celestia. Luna had lifted Celestia's head from the snow and was supporting her neck carefully, and was softly calling to her. Sunset trotted up cautiously, releasing the snowshoe spell as she found the snow here largely blown away and the rock laid bare.

"Is she okay?" whispered Sunset as she drew closer.

Luna looked to her, and then motioned Sunset closer. "She is unconscious, but she is alive. Come here and help me to support her neck."

Sunset stepped closer. Her heart caught in her throat as she saw Celestia laying limply against Luna. Her eyes were closed and her mane had reverted to the simple pink that Sunset remembered from when they had first reunited. The tip of much of her fur was singed, giving her a darker color than she normally sported. Sunset lit her horn.

"No magic!" snapped Luna. She continued more gently. "She has overloaded and her reserves have drained. We need to let her recover naturally to prevent further injury. She should be fine if we can allow her to rest."

Sunset released her spell before it was completed and nodded. "Oh," she responded softly. She put her hooves under Celestia's neck and supported her gently, making an uncomfortable face at seeing her mentor so helpless. "Sorry. I was trying to decide whether traditional treatments might be helpful?"

Luna shook her head. "It is unlikely," she responded. She frowned and looked down into Celestia's face. "Oh sister," she said softly. "None of this is how I envisioned our reunion would be..."

Sunset frowned softly and looked up to Luna. "You wanted her to come back? I thought you wanted the night to last forever."

Luna made an uncomfortable face and then looked back to Celestia. "I was afraid of the battle that her return would signify. But I never wanted to see her like this." She paused for an uncomfortable moment, then added more softly, "Sister, what were you trying to do?"

Something caught Sunset's eye behind Luna. She craned her neck to see, careful not to move Celestia, and her eyes grew wide.

"Princess... do you remember the story about the Crystal Empire? What if she was searching for that?"

Luna shook her head slowly. "The Crystal Empire was lost... it was beyond our magic. It has been lost for a millennium."

Sunset's eyes didn't waver. "What if she had all your power and all the power of a cursed amulet?"

Luna responded slowly, looking to Sunset as she spoke. "Even with all that, the likelihood of success..."

Sunset pointed slowly with her free hoof, interrupting Luna. "...Because I think she found it."

Luna frowned and turned her head back to follow Sunset's hoof. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped. "By the stars...!"

Behind Luna, slowly fading into view, was a massive city of gleaming crystals. Though she had never seen it before, Sunset had no doubt in her mind that this was the city Celestia had mentioned. Celestia had managed to break the curse and restore the Empire.

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Sterling was not certain how much time had elapsed when he came to again, but the world was still dark. He could tell by the stillness of the air that he was indoors, but he did not move and he kept his eyes mostly closed to avoid betraying signs of consciousness. His ears moved subtly as he listened carefully for any movement around him. Finally, hearing nothing, he slowly pushed himself to a standing position.

Still cautious, he held his position. He waited to see if anypony else might move now that he was standing, while simultaneously taking stock of his situation. He was both surprised and relieved to see that he had all his equipment and that his armor was intact.

*"Well, if I was a prisoner then they would at least have taken my sabre,"* he considered.

Finally, he dared to light his horn, casting light around himself to inspect his situation. The floor beneath his hooves was stone, as were the walls around him. He was in a large round room of at least thirty feet diameter. There was only a single door, but a large spiral staircase went upwards and out of sight along the wall.

Cautiously he approached the door and then listened against it. It was completely silent behind it, so he turned his attention upwards. The stairs continued on into the shadows above him, offering no clues as to how far up the ceiling was.

*"What did that wolf do to me?"* he wondered. *"Is this some kind of oubliette?"*

He searched upwards with his eyes, daring to increase the brightness of his horn, but still he could not see the next level. At last he looked back towards the door.

*"Well,"* he thought. *"It's closer... I'll just check what's beyond the door first."*

He crept up to the door and listened to it carefully, holding silent for several moments. At last, hearing nothing, he stepped back and drew his sabre with his magic. He focused on the door and the glow of his

magic surrounded the knob as he carefully turned it, then pulled the door open slowly.

The corridor beyond was dark and ornate, and he stepped through the doorway into it. He moved carefully so as not to let his hooves announce his presence on the hard, polished floor. He dimmed the glow of his horn as much as he could, his sabre ready as his eyes studied the corridor.

There was no motion, just a long dark corridor lined with richly ornate décor. He advanced slowly, his ears forward as he listened for any trace of motion, but there was nothing. Suddenly there was a flash of light behind him. He whirled abruptly as a familiar voice called his name.

"Sterling Honor!" called the voice.

Sterling's eyes widened as he realized the source of the voice and the source of the light were one and the same. Princess Celestia was walking towards him down the hallway, lighting it as she did. Sterling lowered his sabre and bowed. "Your Highness!"

"You betrayed me, Sterling Honor," said Celestia as she drew closer.

"You betrayed all of Equestria," said a second voice, disconcertingly close behind him. He spun around again to see Nightmare Moon advancing from the other direction. Her magic was fully restored, and her mane swirled above her as she stepped deliberately, her polished armor gleaming in the light that Celestia cast from behind him.

"Y... Your Highness!" he gasped, dropping back into his bow.

"You swore loyalty," said Celestia from behind him. "But then you went and stood by her."

Sterling stuttered, "B... but..."

"You have to choose," said Nightmare Moon, stopping just a few feet away. Likewise, Celestia stopped behind him.

"Choose which oath you will honor, Captain," said Celestia. "Then face the consequences of the oath you betrayed."

"But, no!" cried Sterling. "Y... you have to understand! Ma'am, please!"

"There is no room for negotiation, Sterling Honor," said Nightmare Moon. "Choose now."

## Chapter 33 – Advancing Penumbra

Luna could barely believe her eyes, but sure enough, a large crystalline city was slowly fading into view before her eyes. It brought back immediate memories of hovering over the central spires with Celestia.

"Sombra..." she whispered. "Did Celestia really break his curse?"

"Princess?" asked Sunset. "What should we do?"

Luna looked back down to Celestia before looking back to the city. It was close, just a few hundred yards to the first structures, which in turn were growing more solid by the moment. She frowned and looked back to Sunset.

"Have you enough magic to project a shield around the three of us, Sunset Shimmer?" asked Luna. "We do not yet know what the spell has released and we are closer than I would like to be."

"What about Princess Celestia?" asked Sunset.

"Give her to me. It would be safer to be prepared. I will monitor her and instruct you to discontinue the spell if she starts to absorb too much of your magic."

Sunset nodded and supported Celestia while Luna placed her hooves under the elder's neck. Sunset then stepped back and lit her horn. A moment later a bubble of magic appeared around the three of them, sunk halfway into the ground. Luna inspected the spell for a moment and then nodded.

"Well done," she commented. "This should do."

"What are you expecting?" asked Sunset.

Luna looked towards the city, estimating that it was more than half restored. "I do not know," she responded. "Perhaps nothing. But there may be a magical flux once the city is fully restored. It depends on the nature of the curse that hid it, which we did not understand."

Sunset nodded while she adjusted her stance to a wider, more stable one.

Luna looked at Celestia once more before turning her focus back to the city. It was nearly solid now, and she could see the moon reflected off some of the buildings. The city sparkled in the moonlight and it cast sharp shadows behind the buildings. She smiled for a moment, and then her gaze fell again as she remembered the last moments of this city.

*"What of the crystal ponies?" she wondered. "What will they think of me once they learn what I have done? What of further back? Perhaps they blame the both of us for their own exile? What will they do?"*

She watched carefully as the city continued to sharpen and grow more defined.

"Any moment now, Sunset Shimmer," she warned. She sensed Sunset tensing in preparation without needing to turn her head.

They didn't wait very long. The city shimmered slightly as it solidified, and then there was a rush of wind and a blast of magic emanated from the city, spraying a thin glowing disc of energy in all directions. Sunset's shield glowed brightly and rocked as it was struck by the blast, but a second later the wave had passed and the shield had held.

Luna let out a breath that she hadn't realized that she had been holding, and then nodded towards Sunset. "Well done, Sunset Shimmer. You may release the shield now." She took a deep breath and looked at the city, then back to Sunset. "The Crystal Empire is restored."

Sunset hesitated a moment before releasing the magic. Her shield melted down from the top of the bubble to the ground as she, too, looked at the city. "What do we do now?"

Luna's eyes darted from structure to structure, but she could see nothing beyond the gleaming streets and crystalline buildings. "It looks very quiet," she offered with some caution. "We should take shelter. It will be warmer out of the wind and better for Celestia's recovery."

Sunset couldn't hold back a smile. "It will also give us a chance to investigate. This is unprecedented! An entire city that I knew nothing about!"

Luna frowned. "Do not be reckless, Sunset Shimmer. There may well be a great deal of danger involved as well. But now that the spell is apparently complete, the winds will increase and the snow will fill this area once again. Even at my best I would not be able to hold back the weather of the Frozen North for long."

"How will we move Celestia?" asked Sunset. "If we can't use magic to carry her, I don't know what to do. I can't see anything to build a stretcher from...?"

Luna smiled at that. "With how long you managed to elude me, I am surprised that you are not more creative. Here, come hold Celestia for me."

Sunset stepped forward to support Celestia, and Luna stepped back. Her horn lit and the snow in front of her began to swirl tightly.

After a moment, it compacted together and then with a flash it formed the shape of a solid ice sledge. Luna smirked back towards Sunset as Sunset let out a surprised 'oh!'

"The ice will allow it to hold its shape without additional magic and the rails will make it move more easily across the snow and even the crystal streets," explained Luna. She pointed with a hoof towards a nearby guard tower. "We will take her to that structure and set up in there."

"What about the castle?" asked Sunset, looking towards the fantastic structure in the center of the town. "Wouldn't that be more comfortable?"

"It is the most dangerous building," replied Luna. "We shall not approach it until we are certain that the city is as quiet as it appears. Now, assist me."

Luna brought the sledge closer and Sunset began to carefully help lift Celestia onto it.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Sunset in surprise. "She's heavy, but, for her size I expected so much more! I mean, I noticed she seemed a bit light when she leaned on me a few days ago but I thought she was using her magic to support her own weight."

Luna grunted and continued to lift manually, carefully watching Celestia's neck and wings as she did. "We are part pegasus," she explained. "We would not be able to fly with the mass of a unicorn or earth pony."

At last Celestia was resting on the sledge. Luna fashioned a simple harness and stepped into it to pull the sled, while Sunset prepared to push from behind. "Princess?" asked Sunset.

"Hmm?" responded Luna. They began to move towards the guard structure.

"Is the Crystal Empire dangerous? Princess Celestia didn't describe it like it was a hostile place."

Luna didn't respond for a moment. When she did, her voice was edged with hardness. "We do not know the nature of the curse that lost the Empire nor the nature of the magic that restored it. We do not know whether Sombra left other traps for us, nor what may have returned with it. We are at a disadvantage. Any rash action could end in disaster."

"Sombra..." mused Sunset. "You've said that name twice now: who was it?"

"Celestia did not tell you?" asked Luna curiously.

"No," replied Sunset, shaking her head. "She barely mentioned anything about this."

"Hmm," considered Luna. "Sombra was an evil unicorn who had taken over the Crystal Empire with his dark magic. Celestia and I came here to unseat him. Although we defeated him, he cursed the empire and it was lost to us."

"Lost?" echoed Sunset.

Luna only nodded. "Celestia did not know any way to undo the curse and we were forced to abandon this land. But it would appear that Celestia has at last found a way to bring the Empire back."

They reached the guard structure and Luna pushed on the door with her hoof. It swung open quietly, the heavy crystal door swinging effortlessly as if the hinges hadn't seen a thousand years of idle. She listened for a moment and then, hearing nothing, she pulled the sledge forward.

The room was large enough to hold a dozen ponies easily, though it was largely empty. There was a chalkboard at one end of the room containing a simple weekly schedule with a set of five names and a few chairs scattered around. A set of stairs led to a second level where Luna presumed weapons and supplies would be stored, as well as a likely second set of stairs to the roof. The room was clean and besides being a little disorganized, could have been used as recently as yesterday.

Once Sunset entered the room, she closed the door. Although the room darkened, it was still lit by several large windows which let the moonlight in. What was much more obvious was how much warmer it immediately felt without the cold wind.

"I thought I'd never be warm again," exclaimed Sunset. "After so long in that wind, this is just glorious!"

Luna smiled, but she spoke sternly. "Check upstairs, Sunset Shimmer. I would expect there to be supplies. Attempt to locate blankets and bring them back down here."

Sunset nodded and headed for the stairs. She moved quickly at first, but slowed after a few steps as she remembered to show caution. Luna nodded to herself and turned her attention back to Celestia.

*"Now to remove you from that ice, sister,"* she mused. Her back was sore from the effort already expended and she hesitated a moment at the thought of trying to lift Celestia down again. At last she frowned to herself and then lit her horn. The ice sledge melted slowly away

underneath Celestia, gently settling her on the floor while Luna directed the water away from her.

*"You got a little of my magic there, didn't you, sister?" she considered. "But you should be okay. Hopefully being in contact with the floor will allow the land to aid your recovery."*

Sunset returned a moment later, dragging several heavy padded blankets down the stairs behind her. "I never realized just how frustrating it is to not be able to levitate things," she grumbled.

Luna ignored the complaint and directed Sunset to Celestia, helping her to create a warmer nest for the sleeping Princess. Finally, she draped a piece of one last blanket across Celestia's back. "That is probably the best that we can do for now," she commented.

Sunset watched Celestia for a moment. "She looks like she's sleeping," Sunset said at last. "Look how you can see her breathing more deeply. That wasn't so obvious before."

Luna watched for a moment and found herself agreeing. "That is probably a good sign." She lifted her head and looked around the sparse room. "Did you find anything else upstairs?"

Sunset shrugged. "Kind of," she replied. "There were some lockers and a couple of helmets and spears, typical guard stuff. Did you want something specific?"

Luna shook her head. "No," she answered. "I was only checking whether you had seen something unusual."

"Nothing that caught my eye, anyway," explained Sunset.

"Very well then," commented Luna. "Celestia should be safe to sleep here whilst we inspect the rest of the city."

Luna walked directly to the door, opening it with her hoof and then stepping through. She started down the street, staying near the building, and then paused when she noticed that Sunset Shimmer hadn't followed her. She was about to call out when Sunset came around the corner.

"Stay close, Sunset Shimmer," warned Luna.

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"Stratosphere!" shouted Sergeant Impulse. He was frustrated, but he was also worried. The Captain had vanished into the woods to take care of his business too long ago. The earth ponies and unicorns were making good progress on clearing the tracks, but it was clear that the tracks were damaged and he needed to report this.

A moment later the sky blue pegasus was hovering in front of him, giving a sloppy salute. Impulse grimaced.

"Stratosphere," he began. "Take those supposedly remarkable eyes of yours and go find the Captain. He went into those woods there and it's too dark for me to see a blasted thing."

Stratosphere landed and looked over the Sergeant's shoulder towards the wood. "But dude," he said. "I can't fly in there!"

Sergeant Impulse leaned close and spoke very deliberately. "If you call me 'dude' one more time, Corporal," he warned, "you will never fly again." He paused for effect, then raised his voice to a roar. **"NOW GET IN THERE!"**

Stratosphere leapt back and snapped to attention. "Yes, Sergeant!" he replied obediently, and then darted off towards the woods. He landed just before reaching the tree line and continued to trot as he vanished into the dark. Impulse shook his head and rolled his eyes as he went back to supervise the work.

Stratosphere returned about twenty minutes later. He landed in front of Impulse and snapped to attention, offering a much better presentation than earlier. "Corporal Stratosphere reporting on reconnaissance of the woods, Sergeant!"

Impulse smiled. "Better, Corporal," he observed. "Report. Where is the Captain?"

Stratosphere frowned. "Bad news, d... Sarge. Sergeant! Um... anyway. He's not there. There was a scuffle in the snow, but I couldn't find any tracks leading away from it. It had to be magic."

Impulse stomped a hoof. "Blessed magic!" he cursed. "The Captain is a unicorn," he growled. "And a soldier! What could have taken him?"

Stratosphere shook his head and was careful to watch how he phrased his sentences. "I don't know... er... Sergeant. But I could go up high and try to see anything."

Impulse sighed. "Do it," he ordered, and then he had to raise a hoof to shield his face from the blast of snow as Stratosphere launched straight up. "I didn't bloody well dismiss you yet!" he shouted. But the pegasus was already just a dot in the sky.

"Oh, good riddance," he grumbled, and went back to work.

-----

Stratosphere soared straight upwards as quick as his wings would carry him. *"I'm always getting yelled at,"* he grumbled to himself. *"Then they're all like, 'go find the Queen, Stratosphere'. 'Go find the Captain, Stratosphere'. 'Don't call me dude, Stratosphere.' Dude, it's like a compliment! Dude is a good thing!"*

His mood improved as the ground fell away beneath him, and soon he took to scanning the area beneath him. He was high enough to be able to see for several miles in every direction, and his sharp eyes started to take in details.

*"All right,"* he mused. *"There's the tracks... and the station's way up there. If I follow the mountain ridge... there's the rendezvous. Looks like the pegasi are there already... chilling. Dude, I wish I was with them. Anyway, whatever... I should look back near the slide."*

His eyes caught a sparkle miles to the north, just out of his sight.

*"What's that?"* he asked himself. *"I never saw anything up there before..."*

He turned his nose upwards and climbed higher still, watching the curve of the ground far below increase even as the distance he could see grew larger. As the sparkle came into his line of sight his eyes grew wider.

*"Dude!! It's a city! That was never there before! There's some kind of shadow around it..."*

He looked back down to where Impulse was still working on the slide, and wondered whether to report it. Finally, he shook his head.

*"Ah, heck. Could be a mirage, right? I better go check it out before I report it."*

## Chapter 34 – Shadowed Dawn

Sunset paused before leaving the room, looking back to Princess Celestia sleeping in the middle of the room.

"Everything is going to be okay, Princess," she whispered. "I'm going to make sure of that."

Celestia shuffled in her sleep and seemed to snuggle deeper into the nest of blankets. Sunset nodded to herself and stepped through the doorway.

"Crystal..." murmured Celestia.

Sunset nodded. "Yes," she replied, smiling softly. "You did it."

Sunset closed the door and checked left and right, then hurried around the corner to catch up with Princess Luna.

"Stay close, Sunset Shimmer," warned Luna. Sunset nodded.

"Sorry, Princess. I just wanted to make sure Celestia was okay."

Luna frowned. "And are you satisfied?"

Sunset nodded, slowly. "She's dreaming, I think. But she looks peaceful."

"Dreaming...?" echoed Luna. She looked up towards the sky for a moment, then shook her head. "Very well." She looked back to Sunset. "We shall investigate this segment of the city, working our way towards the center. If possible, we must avoid detection. But if we are detected, then we shall attempt to make contact." She looked around herself. "There should be crystal ponies everywhere... it is odd that the city is so quiet."

"Wait... *crystal* ponies?" asked Sunset. "What is this place?"

Luna sighed softly, but she smiled a little. "Celestia and I never knew very much about the Crystal Empire... we learned about it early in our reign. But it is a magical core of some sort. When it was active, the Empire reflected love and happiness across all of Equestria. Then King Sombra took over and his darkness began to take its place. That was when Celestia and I noticed, and we took action."

"That was..." Sunset hesitated. "That was the failed mission that Celestia mentioned?"

Luna started suddenly, without responding. She raised her head and her eyes grew distant, darting side to side as if she were searching for something.

"Princess?" asked Sunset. "What's wrong?"

"It is..." Luna started, but then her voice trailed off. After a moment she frowned, her eyes returning to normal. "It is nothing," she concluded.

"But you..." began Sunset, but Luna cut her off.

"I said that it was nothing, Sunset Shimmer!" snapped Luna.

Sunset stepped back and was silent for a moment. She wasn't prepared to push Luna on this point, but she felt that it had to have been something. She debated in her mind what to say for almost a minute while Luna watched her with some kind of defiance. Finally, she sighed and asked again. "You were talking about taking some kind of action?"

Luna nodded, slowly. "We underestimated King Sombra," she continued. "We overpowered him but we did not anticipate his treachery. He cursed the Empire and we lost them all. Celestia was never quite the same afterwards..."

"What do you mean?" asked Sunset.

Luna frowned as she looked around. "I suppose that I never considered it before... but perhaps Celestia carried more guilt over that day than I thought. I thought that she was just being rather cold, but to go so far to try and recover it... I wonder..."

Sunset frowned as well, and also looked around slowly. "I think Princess Celestia carries much more weight than she lets anypony know, Princess. When I was her student, I sometimes caught hints of her concerns, even if she wouldn't admit them."

Luna looked down and was silent for a moment. Sunset waited until Luna raised her head again. "We have work to do, Sunset Shimmer," she said abruptly.

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Celestia's eyes opened slowly. She found herself in a dark, ornate room, with more blankets piled atop and around her than she could remember ever using in the past. It was warm and oddly cozy, and she was extremely comfortable. She snuggled deeper into the nest and considered just going back to sleep. But after a moment, she began to wonder how she had gotten there.

*"Wasn't... wasn't I in the Frozen North? It's so warm here... maybe I dreamt the whole thing?"*

She lifted her head just enough to look around. The room was dark but a sliver of silver moonlight crept in from a slit high on the wall near the ceiling. She looked around and admired the ornate furniture in the room, and briefly wondered why she was sleeping on the floor instead of in the large princess bed.

She yawned in a very un-regal manner and stretched out her forelegs, and then pushed herself to a standing position. She stretched like a cat and lifted each hoof in turn to get her blood circulating again.

*"I can't remember the last time I slept so well," she marveled. "I feel completely reset."*

Her head swiveled slowly again. *"But where am I? It almost seems familiar, but I can't place anything."*

She walked to the large set of double doors and gently lit her horn to nudge them open. They opened without a sound and granted her a view into the hallway beyond. When she saw that it was quiet, she pushed one door further and stepped out.

The hallway was likewise ornate but lit more regularly by slits in the ceiling. Ornate crystal lined the walls and cast fractal-like reflections on the floor. The moonlight twinkled in the facets of the crystal as Celestia walked slowly down the hallway. She listened carefully but heard no sign of any other pony moving about. Finally, she stopped and studied the wall more carefully, lifting a hoof to touch it gently.

"Crystal..." she mused to herself. "Did it work? Am I in the Crystal Castle?"

"Lovely, isn't it?" called a deep, gravelly voice. It came from the far end of the corridor, and Celestia snapped her attention towards it with a gasp.

A large, royal unicorn came around the far corner and started down the hallway towards her. His fur was a dark charcoal grey which barely reflected the moonlight. He wore a rich robe of royal red fur and gleaming silver armor over his chest and on each hoof. A smoky black mane waved over his head and a thin silver crown was placed in it behind a menacingly curved red horn. His smile showed his gleaming white teeth, making it hard to look away.

"No greeting?" he continued. "After I took the time to invite you to my castle?"

Celestia turned to face him, and took a single step back. "Invited?" she queried.

The unicorn chuckled and continued to advance steadily. "Well, for all intents and purposes," he purred.

Celestia took another step back, but a wall blocked her passage. Part of her mind protested. *"That was a corridor a moment ago!"*

Celestia raised her head, but she was feeling uneasy. She sought her magic and found that she could not summon any to her horn. "Who... who are you? What do you want?"

"You don't remember me?" asked the stallion, never slowing his advance. "Let me give you a hint. I am the shadows. I am the darkness in your heart and the fear that clouds your mind."

Celestia stepped back again, only to press against the wall. She tried to stand upright again, as strongly as she dared. "Those are only riddles!" she protested.

The stallion's smile widened. "Well," he offered, "I like riddles, Go ahead, guess."

Celestia shook her head. "You look like... Sombra. But you can't be."

The unicorn chuckled, continuing. "Well, well. Right in one, Celestia."

Celestia started. "No! We destroyed you! You cannot be here!"

Sombra chuckled again. His advance brought him ever nearer and yet he always seemed to still be distant. "Destroyed? No. You put me away, stored me like a filly's toy. But now *I* want to play."

Celestia shook her head, trying to shake the illusion. Some of the pieces fell into place in her mind, and she stood with stronger resolve. "This is just a dream!"

Sombra smiled, showing fangs. "If only you had used the Elements of Harmony on me when you had a chance... I might not have been able to take the Empire away."

Celestia's eyes widened. "You... you knew about the Elements?"

Sombra nodded, still advancing, still distant. His figure was impossibly clear and his voice echoed all around Celestia's head. "Oh yes. But they don't work anymore, do they? You destroyed them, didn't you?"

Celestia bit her lip and frowned. "I did what I had to do!" she protested. "I had no choice!"

"No choice but to throw away your sister... that certainly turned out well."

Celestia was not sure what to say, but Sombra continued.

"And did you have a choice this time?" asked Sombra. "Shall I tell you what you've done now?"

Celestia tensed. "What could you possibly have to say to me?"

Sombra laughed, then spoke with a wide smile. "You've cut off the Crystal Heart. Severed it completely! Now there is no way to restore everypony. They're lost forever. You failed again."

Celestia gasped. "What!? No! You're lying!"

Sombra's smile widened impossibly as his jaw opened, showing the fangs that lined his muzzle. He was closer now, slowly advancing. "Your fear is palpable. Fear, doubt, guilt - all so delicious - and you have so much, don't you Princess?"

"Just a dream..." repeated Celestia. She squeezed her eyes closed and turned her head away. "If I ignore you, you won't have any power over me."

"Princess," whispered Sombra, right into her ear. There was the sound of rushing air, and then Sombra spoke again. "I know what scares you."

Celestia cracked her eyes open just enough to peek. She snapped her eyes open with a gasp as she recognized the shape in front of her. Nightmare Moon stood before her, tall and dark, with her power on full display. Celestia had only a moment to let it sink in before Nightmare Moon lunged forward, her fangs pressing into Celestia's throat.

Celestia screamed.

-----

Luna pressed on, with Sunset following close behind her. Although her senses were tuned to the world around her, her mind was racing. It hadn't been nothing at all, no matter what she had told Sunset Shimmer. It had been a feeling that had been all too common since her return as Nightmare Moon. Somepony was having a nightmare -- and it was a really bad one.

She thought that she'd gotten used to the sensations, but the strength of this one had caught her off guard and left her rather uncertain. She couldn't know who it was without entering the dreamscape, but she'd stopped doing that ten years ago as punishment to the ponies who had rejected her.

*"Besides," she thought to herself. "Being so powerful, it may be a part of the curse. Perhaps the crystal ponies are trapped in a shared nightmare, and are just starting to make their way back. Were I to enter that dream, I could likewise become trapped. No, it is best to stay here until we know more."*

They continued their slow advance for nearly an hour, but the city was quiet as they continued to search from street to street. Occasionally they would stop to listen to doorways as they passed by, or peer cautiously in windows. Eventually Luna felt brave enough to light her horn and use a sensing spell to help in the search, but there was still nothing.

"Princess, we're almost up to the castle," observed Sunset.  
"Should we circle around and check the next quadrant of the city?"

Luna held for a moment as she listened to her senses, and then shook her head. "No, Sunset Shimmer. I do not believe it will make any difference." She looked up towards the castle, so much larger up close. "I do not sense anything, even here. We can advance."

They moved out into the circular street that ran around the castle. In six different directions, streets branched off in straight lines out into the city – dividing it into the so-called quadrants that Sunset had mentioned. Across this street the castle was supported above the ground by a number of pillars and underneath the castle was a large open area. They headed there and as they stepped under the castle Luna frowned. She could feel some sort of residual magic here. From Sunset's hesitation, she could tell that Sunset felt something too.

"Princess, it feels strange here, like something's missing."

Luna looked carefully, noticing a set of points in the center of the area. Like the pillars of a cave, one came down from above and one rose from below, leaving a gap in-between. She considered what she knew of the Crystal Empire.

"Celestia knows more than I do," replied Luna, approaching the points. "But I would guess that this mount was intended for some form of artifact. That would explain why we still sense some power here."

Sunset frowned and looked around carefully. "It could be anything... what do you think it was?"

Luna shook her head. "I do not know. But I suspect that we should want to find it. If we are fortunate, it will still be in the city." She looked up at the massive structure above them. "We should search the castle."

They headed towards the front of the castle, coming from behind the stairs to avoid being too exposed. As they drew near, Luna raised a hoof to stop them.

"Stay here, Sunset Shimmer," she commanded. "It would be safer for me to fly around the castle first, and then enter via an upper balcony. We will be less visible than a direct entry on the front stairs."

"I thought we agreed that there was nopony here?" asked Sunset.

"We still cannot say that for certain," replied Luna. "Stay here."

Luna stepped out from underneath the castle and leapt into the air, spreading her wings. Her wings were silent as she flapped upwards and circled the towers until she spied an open window large enough to admit her. The window was about halfway up the tower and she banked towards it, carefully aiming her flight. As she drew near she pulled up and then tucked her wings in at the last moment so that she would fit through the opening. She braced her legs and landed as quietly as she could manage on the polished crystal floor inside.

Suddenly the floor began to shake beneath her hooves, and a loud rumbling sound came from all around her. "What the...?"

Before she could even turn around there was a loud crash and the sound of smashing crystal behind her. What moonlight was filtering into the room was abruptly cut off as the opening was sealed shut behind her, leaving her in pitch darkness.

-----

Sunset watched Luna for as long as she dared, then ducked back into the shadows behind the stairway. She sighed softly and looked back at the points in the center of the area.

*"What are they for?" she wondered. "And why is whatever it is missing?"*

Abruptly the ground began to shake beneath her hooves, and a loud rumble accompanied by the sound of smashing crystal reached her ears. Sunset gasped and whirled around to look out into the city. A mass of black spiked crystals was racing towards her at a remarkable rate, erupting from the ground and smashing some of the existing crystal structures as it collided with them. She turned and ran back towards the points in the center and pressed her back against them, but the dark growth quickly surrounded her.

Before she could even complete a shield spell she had been engulfed and found herself falling into blackness.

-----

Nightmare Moon stood over Celestia as she lay motionless on the floor, Celestia's pink mane in disarray across the crystal surface. Nightmare laughed, softly at first, then louder and grander. Her voice grew deeper and her form shifted into the charcoal colored form of King Sombra. His laughter continued as the essence of Celestia's magic drifted up and enveloped him, and then soaked into his form.

"Oh, Celestia," he mocked. "You played so well, you did everything exactly how I predicted that you would. And that, you see, is why I win."

"And now, dear Princess," he chuckled. "Now we will play this little story again. And again, and again. Each time, I get a little more of you, until you can take no more and ALL your magic is mine! And you will *never* wake up." He laughed again, louder and harder than before, his voice echoing as Celestia suddenly found herself standing alone in a dark hallway again.

In her nest of military quilts, Celestia whimpered as she heard Nightmare Moon's laughter over and over again. But nopony was there to hear her.

## Chapter 35 – Shaded Impressions

Sunset groaned and held her head as she sat up slowly. Her head was throbbing and she had to hold still for a moment before she lit her horn to look around. She found herself in a large circular room built with rough stones. The floor beneath her hooves was likewise stone, and a staircase circled the room heading upwards.

She rubbed her head again and then started as she noticed a pony standing across the room from her. He was dressed in armor and facing away from her, but after a moment she recognized him.

"Captain Sterling!" she called over. She started to trot towards him, slowing down as she drew near. It was definitely the Captain, but he was unmoving as he faced away and stared at a wooden doorway in the wall of the room. Even as she drew near he hadn't moved, and Sunset found herself a bit unnerved again.

"Um, Captain?" she called more softly as she approached. He still didn't move and she craned her neck around to look at his face. His expression was blank and his eyes were wide, his pupils mere pinpricks. A light green glow filled his eyes and leaked from the edges. Upon seeing this Sunset took a step back and shook her head.

"What kind of spell have you gotten yourself into?" she asked him, rhetorically. She circled him carefully and noted no sign of injury or damage to his armor, so she followed his line of sight back to the door.

"Well, I obviously shouldn't touch that," she mused. Sunset followed his stare again, musing as she studied the door. "I wonder what you see..."

At last she turned her attention back towards Sterling. "I guess... I can try to cast a generic dispel. Without knowing what you're under, I can't be much more specific."

She stepped back and took a deep breath. Summoning more magic to her horn, she prepared to cast dispel in addition to her basic light spell.

"All right Captain," she murmured, stepping towards him again. She lowered her horn in order to touch Sterling's forehead. "Snap out of it."

Her magic flashed a brilliant amber as she made contact, but there was a sudden flashback. A black arc with vivid violet edges jolted back to her horn, sending her staggering backwards.

"Ugh! What...?" Sunset gasped abruptly as the light from her horn began to fade. Dark black crystals began to protrude from her horn, cutting off her magic. She began to panic and tried to send a strong surge through it to clear the obstruction, but she couldn't summon the power.

"My horn!" she gasped, trying again, and again. But her magic continued to fade until all the light was gone. She could feel the obstruction when she tried to channel her magic, but she couldn't push through it. She laid down and tried desperately to scrape at the crystals with her forehooves, but again she couldn't even chip the obstructions. Panic soon began to give way to despair.

"My horn," she repeated, nearly sobbing. "I can't channel any magic... what am I going to do?!"

----

Luna looked around the room she was in with a careful, studied eye. She didn't need the light of the moon to see in the dark, and she could see that the room was still largely intact. The only damage had been behind her, where the rush of black crystal had shattered the original wall, puncturing it with a darker, coarser crystal that let no light through from beyond.

Luna tapped a hoof at the crystal floor beneath herself, frowning slightly at the way the sound echoed. She looked around herself again and then approached a bureau along one wall. Lifting her head, she looked into the mirror atop the bureau, and then frowned again. Her reflection was hazy and indistinct, more so than she thought it should be.

"So," she mused. *"I have been slipped into the shadows."*

She looked around again. *"I cannot say that I like being at the whim of some other force. But if I cannot stay immersed in the waking realm, I suspect whatever the force was will not expect me to dive deeper."*

She closed her eyes and summoned power to her horn. The night bent to her will with minimal effort and she slipped with ease the rest of the way into the dream realm. She flapped her wings slowly to hover there, darkness all around her. As she opened her eyes, she was surprised by how empty it was. Normally the dreams of ponies would surround her, appearing as bubbles in this reality and allowing her a portal by which to enter any dream. But here, she saw only three.

All three called to her senses – somepony was suffering in each one. The pull indicated a nightmare which was attacking their very psyches, and this was the type of battle that Luna used to work to resolve each and every night. But one called more strongly than the others – this pony was on the verge of breaking.

*"I have not felt one so bad for longer than I can remember,"* she mused as she approached it. She felt all the memories of past dreams coming back to her, and the things that she had interceded on so many times before. Phobias, doubts, confusion... she had helped countless ponies work through their truest fears. But she had refused to answer the call after becoming Nightmare Moon, and she found herself shamed. *"How many ponies did I lose when I ignored their calls? Was my stubbornness really worth it?"* She touched the globe gently, shivering as a chill ran down her spine. *"Did they really deserve my punishment?"*

She exhaled softly, then took a deep breath. *"I'm coming, my little pony,"* she whispered. Her horn flashed and she entered the dream.

As was always the case, the dream was just shadows as she started in. She needed to find an object in the dreamer's mind to replace, only then could she fully understand the dream. But it did not take long to understand the basics – it was one of the most classic nightmares. A trapped pony in a long hallway, stalked by a shadow whom she could not escape. Luna smiled halfway. *"The shadow always makes for a good entrance,"* she mused. *"At least then, I have the dreamer's attention."*

She moved herself to the shadow, and then frowned as she felt a slight resistance. But she had dealt with stubborn ponies before. With a little more effort, she deflected the negative energy to the side and began to assume the shape of the shadow. A smooth transition was important to avoid startling the dreamer out of the dream.

She gasped as the energy returned, striking her squarely in the flank, sending her stumbling sideways into the wall. "What in the...?" she asked. The shadow reformed and cast a glare at her, then started down the hallway again.

Luna frowned and lit her horn again. This time she focused her power on breaking up the energy. It was riskier, but it would disrupt the dream for long enough for her to assert control – even the most stubborn images needed time to be recreated by a dreamer's mind.

"None of that!" she snarled, casting the spell. Her magic struck the shadow squarely, but rather than exploding as it usually did, it seemed to cast a surprised glance back at her. After a moment, it dissolved into a thin mist and snaked back along the hallway, and then disappeared around a corner.

"Curious..." mused Luna, but then she shook her head. She had to move in now to avoid destroying the dream's continuity. She stepped in place of the shadow and announced her presence by shouting ahead.

**"ENOUGH!"** She let her form materialize and stepped smartly down the hallway.

It took a moment, but she felt the dreamer's mind accept her, and the scene came into sharper focus for her. She was in an ornate crystal hallway, lit by the moon shining through slits high on the walls. At the end of the hallway, a large white pony shuddered against the wall behind herself. Luna gasped. "Celestia?!"

"N-no!" cried Celestia. "Nightmare Moon, please! No more!"

Luna's jaw dropped, and she trotted up to Celestia. "Celestia!"

Celestia dipped her head beneath her wing. "I can't take anymore!"

Luna held there for a moment, tilting her head. She looked down at herself, then back to Celestia. True, she was wearing Nightmare Moon's armor, but otherwise she could not look more different. Even her size was laughable, she was just barely more than half Celestia's height. She began to laugh. Not the cruel, malicious laugh of Nightmare Moon, but a joyful, honest laugh of honest relief. "Oh sister!"

Celestia's shivers stopped after a moment, and then she lowered her wing to look back. "Wha... Nightmare Moon?"

Luna shook her head as she gained control of her laughter. "No, sister, look at me."

Celestia looked at Luna's armor first, her eyes roaming across Luna's body, but then she met Luna's eyes. She held there for a moment, and then all at once recognition set in.

"Luna?" she asked, her voice breaking.

Luna lifted off her helmet and set it aside on the floor, smiling down to Celestia. "You are *such* a drama queen," she teased.

Tears flooded to Celestia's eyes and she was up in an instant. She darted forward, wrapping her wings around her little sister. "Oh Luna!" she cried. "I thought I'd never see you again!"

Luna smiled softly and leaned into the embrace, raising her forelegs to embrace Celestia inside of her wing wrap. She felt a decade of frustration melting away in the once-familiar embrace, and she pressed her face into Celestia's breast, the giggles forgotten. "I missed you too," she replied.

Celestia held tightly and nuzzled down along the back of Luna's neck. For minutes she seemed content to just hold on, until Luna began to get a little uncomfortable. She struggled, just enough to let Celestia

know that she wanted to move, and Celestia raised her head. She did not loosen her wings much, but she looked around again.

"How can this be?" asked Celestia. "Is this still a dream?"

Luna nodded. "Aye, it is. You are dreaming very deeply." She frowned for a moment, looking up to Celestia. "Was Nightmare Moon really the one tormenting you?"

Celestia bit her lip and leaned back enough to look down at Luna. Her hoof came up and gingerly caressed the crescent moon symbol on the front of Luna's armor. She studied it quietly for a moment as Luna waited for a reply. "Yes," she responded quietly. "Over and over again." She turned her head aside. "From the first moment that I saw Nightmare Moon... it was like she triggered every fear I ever had. And knowing that you were she, and that I made you... it was all the worse for that."

"I really got to you...?" asked Luna, somewhat rhetorically. She reached up and turned Celestia's head back towards herself. "Look at me, sister. I am Nightmare Moon no longer."

Celestia's eyes saddened as she looked back to Luna. "I attacked you," she said quietly. Then she added, more quietly. "I hurt you."

The admission nearly broke Luna's heart. Not just the recent events, but everything that she had been holding back came tumbling forward and she felt surprising tears springing to her eyes. She bit her lip hard to fight them back, and then she responded as flatly as she could. "Yes... you did."

Celestia's tears returned and began to run down her cheeks, first one and then the other. "I... I never wanted to hurt you. Never!"

Luna nodded very slowly. She lowered her head, afraid that she would lose her composure if she watched Celestia's tears. But the wall had been broken and the words seemed to come more easily now. "You... said some horrible things to me," she whispered.

Celestia nodded slowly, and she replied gently, her voice cracking. "I know... and I was wrong. I was so very wrong... Luna, I'm so very sorry."

Luna raised her head again, surprised to find that her own cheeks were wet despite her best efforts to appear stoic. She met Celestia's gaze and the two of them stood there quietly, until Celestia spoke again.

"Luna... I love you. Please, please forgive me?"

Luna's heart finished breaking, and her tears began to flow in earnest. She pressed herself against Celestia's breast again. "Oh sister! I love you, too! I've missed you so very much!"

Celestia's wings squeezed Luna tight, and the two of them stayed like that for what felt like a long time. After a while, Luna whispered softly. "Sister... I've made a mess of things. Will you help me to fix Equestria?"

Celestia gave her a reassuring squeeze. "Of course, dear sister. We were *meant* to rule together. But this time... you show me what to do."

Luna smiled softly. "Thank you, Celestia. Thank you."

Celestia was quiet for a moment, and then she asked a new question. "Luna... I was working with a pony named Sunset Shimmer. Do... do you know what happened to her?"

Luna nodded softly. "She came here with me." She smiled softly and looked up to Celestia again. "She is a remarkable pony... you chose your student well."

Celestia relaxed a little bit. "Thank you, sister. But if you are here... then where is she now?"

Luna frowned a bit, and then stepped back. She looked behind herself, back down the hallway. "I do not know," she responded. "But there is something more going on here, and I think we should get to work."

Celestia folded her wings reluctantly and looked around as well. "What do you propose?"

Luna looked back to Celestia. "What were you dreaming?" she asked. "Besides Nightmare Moon, was there anything else?"

Celestia thought back. The dream had echoed so many times that she could see nothing but the shadow creeping down the hallway towards her... and the dreadful final lunge. She shivered and shook her head, but something caught her attention at the end of the hallway. For just a moment she thought she saw a pair of glowing red eyes, and everything came back to her.

"Wait! The first time it wasn't Nightmare Moon... at least not at first!"

Luna nodded encouragingly. "Anything that you can remember will help. Do you know who it was?"

Celestia set her jaw firmly. "King Sombra," she replied.

Luna's jaw dropped. "Impossible! Certainly, you were just imagining him. The stress of raising the Empire...?"

Celestia shook her head. "I don't know, sister. But... he spoke to me. He told me that I had broken the bonds of the Crystal Heart."

"The Crystal Heart?" asked Luna.

Celestia nodded. "It's an artifact that belongs to this Kingdom... it was once responsible for spreading the light and love of the Empire. He said that without it, the crystal ponies were lost forever." She looked worried. "Was it my imagination?"

Luna shook her head. "I'm sorry, sister, but perhaps not. The Empire has returned... but it is empty. Sunset Shimmer and I located no sign of life, until I was trapped in the tower by some dark spell."

Celestia lowered her head. "Then it was all for naught. I've failed after all, again."

"Not necessarily," replied Luna. She smiled a little as she raised a hoof to lift Celestia's head. "You have done the hard part – Sombra's curse is fragmented, if not outright broken. If there is still a small shard remaining to be shattered, I'm certain that we can do it together. We need to try."

Celestia nodded slowly. "I will try anything, Luna."

Something caught Luna's senses behind her, and she turned her head slowly. She saw nothing out of the ordinary, and then turned her head back to Celestia.

"I am going to send you back to the waking world, Celestia. I left Sunset Shimmer in the square underneath the castle. I believe that is where the artifact – this Crystal Heart – belongs. The two of you should undertake to locate it and return it."

"What about you?" asked Celestia.

Luna looked around again. "There is something else here that requires my attention."

"You'll be careful?" asked Celestia.

Luna smiled. "This is my domain."

They embraced and held there for a moment. "Find Sunset Shimmer, and find the artifact," reminded Luna.

Celestia nodded. "Be careful, sister."

"Do not worry," replied Luna. She leaned forward and touched the tip of her horn to Celestia's forehead. "I will join you when I can." Her horn lit, and Celestia faded away.

Luna straightened up as her horn faded, and then she turned around to look back down the hallway. "If you do not dare to show yourself, monster," she called. "Then I *will* find you."

## Chapter 36 – Warming the Coals

*"Find Sunset Shimmer, and find the artifact."*

Celestia's eyes opened slowly, and she raised her head from the nest of blankets that she found herself in. She looked around the room slowly while she tried to shake off the sleep that still struggled to hold onto her. She noted that the small, nearly round room was much sparser and much less ornate than the one she had dreamt of – but that the nest of blankets was surprisingly similar.

She sighed deeply and pushed herself to a standing position, and then stretched out her legs as best she could. She winced at the stiffness of her muscles and tried to remember everything that had happened. She found it odd that everything was easy to remember right up until the crystal caverns under Canterlot. After that... everything seemed like a blurry dream. She could only half remember it and time seemed rushed in those memories.

She did remember Sunset casting a spell on her and the rush of power that followed. She remembered striking down Nightmare Moon – and this weighed heavily on her heart. Luna had forgiven her in the dream... but was that really Luna? She felt like it was, but at the same time, it was a dream. She could have simply wanted Luna's forgiveness so badly that her own mind brought it all up.

She half remembered flying to the Frozen North, and she half remembered finding the Crystal Empire buried in the shadow realm under all the snow. It had taken everything she had to cut the magical ties that locked it away and pull it back to reality. She remembered the burning pain of the magical overload and then...

Then she remembered nothing else until the dreams started.

She looked around the room again and her eyes focused on the pile of coarse blankets near the center of the room. *"Well,"* she mused. *"Somepony was here... I didn't create that nest on my own. All things considered I should be buried in the snow of the Frozen North by now."*

She thought back further. *"If that really was Luna in my dream... oh, how I hope it was! But if it was, then Sunset Shimmer is here and may need my help. If I can locate her, then that shall confirm everything else."*

She paused near the doorway and studied her reflection in the gloss of the smooth crystal wall. Her mane was once again reverted to a long but simple pink, lacking the magically striped pastel flow she held

when her magic was charged. But her injuries were largely healed and she felt much better. Experimentally she opened her wings and was relieved to find that she could extend and stretch them without the pain she'd felt since returning to Equestria. She smiled softly and closed her wings again.

*"It could be worse," she thought to herself. "The magic seems to have healed me for the most part. I may be drained, but I'm healthy and I should recharge quickly enough."*

A sudden thought crossed her mind. *"Sombra may be out there."*

*She sighed softly, and then set her jaw firmly. "I just need to watch my step. He can't have that much power after being locked away himself for so long. Besides, Sunset was fairly strong last time I saw her. Between the two of us, if we are not stupid, we should be all right. Particularly if Luna joins us."*

*Her smile returned. "Oh, I hope that dream was for real. But if it was... then I have a task to do. I had best get to it."*

She turned towards the doorway and carefully opened it using her horn. She slowly stuck her head out through the open doorway, looking and listening at the shaded street outside. The moonlight lit the Crystal Empire well, the crystals reflecting and refracting the light off the spires of every building. Looking carefully and straining her ears, she neither saw nor heard anything. She stepped out into the street and closed the door quietly.

Celestia looked around to orient herself and quickly located the Crystal Castle at the center of the city, rising far above the other buildings. She frowned as she noticed that the crystal of the city appeared to grow darker towards the castle – at the base of the castle itself and halfway up its walls the crystal was so dark and opaque that her eyes had difficulty making out shapes.

*"I think I should assume that at least part of my dream was real, then," she mused. "I remember that black crystal from before... it was a signature of King Sombra." She looked around herself. "But, it does not cover the city... only part of the castle. That must mean something."*

She considered for a moment whether to walk or to stretch her newly healed wings and fly, but after a moment she decided to walk. *"I will be less conspicuous on the ground where I can hide in the shadows, than in the air where everypony in the city can see me."*

She started walking slowly towards the castle, keeping close to the shaded sides of the various buildings. She found as she drew closer that she had to step more carefully over the increasingly uneven terrain – the dark crystals were rough and often broke through the smooth crystal of

the road. But nothing interrupted her approach. At last she found herself standing directly across the ring road from the castle.

Celestia frowned as she studied the castle. The darker crystal here was nearly solid and rose up from the ground to engulf the lower part of the castle, rising in some places to nearly half its height. She could not see the square underneath and she approached the crystal, carefully raising a hoof and touching the crystal to test how solid it was.

She gasped as there was a spark between her hoof and the crystal. She had a sudden vision, seeing a scene as if from another's eyes. It seemed to flicker at first – a flash of dark magic, a scene of a throne room, an indistinct pony staring hypnotized at something – but then it settled into a consistent vision. It took a moment for Celestia to realize what she was seeing but at last she recognized a dark hallway. From her view, she could see Luna from behind while Luna appeared to be shouting angrily, although Celestia could hear no sound. With the vision came a flash of insight, and Celestia withdrew her hoof.

*"So... this crystal is more than just something you threw down, Somba. It is literally a part of you, your protrusion into this world."*

She looked up at the dark crystal rising along the wall of the castle. *"But you are not yet powerful enough to manifest, I think... and so you bide your time with Luna."* She chuckled to herself. *"You may be underestimating her... I did. Still..."*

Celestia frowned, setting her jaw. *"Still... you have given me a clue about where to start on this side. The throne room is clearly real."*

Celestia turned and followed the wall around to the front of the castle, checking all the while for any crack or path into the square underneath. Although the dark crystal wall continued to seal off the square, she was somewhat surprised to find the stairs to the main entrance intact. Some of the dark crystals had intruded upon the base of the stairs, but for the most part the path looked unimpeded. Celestia considered.

*"Just go in the front door, then?"* she wondered. *"Doesn't seem like the most brilliant plan, does it?"*

She raised her head and studied the ornate double doors, constructed of gleaming crystal that caught the moon's light and reflected it off in all directions. *"Well,"* she mused, *"I haven't any other ideas."*

Celestia climbed the stairs and quietly pushed open one of the grand doors, taking a moment to look around herself. She did not know of the layout of the Crystal Castle, but the entrance foyer was as grand and inviting as any castle she had ever visited. Following the obvious signs of royalty was likely to lead her where she needed to go, and so she started

to follow the royal red carpet. Up the grand staircase she followed it, and at the top the carpet bent away to the left while the right path was bare. She followed the carpet to the left, and then continued through several more turns.

At last she stood in a short, wide hallway that terminated in an ornate set of double doors with the carpet running right up to them. Celestia smiled. *"There it is. Thank goodness for the ego that goes into castle design."*

She approached the doors and listened to them carefully. *"Could be a trap,"* she considered. *"Perhaps the best way to defeat an ambush is to take the lead from the start..."*

Hearing nothing behind the doors, she pushed one of the them open and stepped through confidently. **"Sombra!"** she announced, her ears listening carefully. "I am here!"

She held her position with all of her senses on high alert. Nothing seemed to happen, so after a minute she relaxed her guard. *"He's not here,"* she mused. *"That does suggest that he can't materialize yet..."*

She stepped the rest of the way into the room and looked around slowly. The throne room was a long, wide room not unlike the throne room in Canterlot. A single throne sat on a raised dais at the far end, with a royal red carpet leading from the doorway to the dais. On the walls of either side of the room were ornate tapestries depicting various scenes in Equestria's history, and in particular that of the Crystal Empire. Celestia noted that there was no depiction of Nightmare Moon in these histories – the Empire had been lost before all that happened. The tapestries closest to the throne depicted Sombra himself and Celestia frowned, seeing nothing of value there.

*"He must have had a token of some sort... to form a base link from this world to his shadows. It must be here somewhere..."*

At last she advanced on the throne itself, studying it carefully. It was fairly regal, decorated in royal red fabric draped over an onyx crystal frame. Her attention was drawn to a sphere attached to the top of the throne with a single dark crystal embedded within it.

She approached carefully from the side of the throne and reached out with a tendril of golden magic, testing and evaluating the crystal. "Yes," she mused. "That's the key."

She took a couple of deep breaths as she considered her next move. *"Sombra's focus was shadow magic. It's been a long time since I have needed to summon that. I hope that it won't take very much power..."*

She took a step back and spread her wings, drawing the strength she had into her horn. She frowned and then her eyes went dark, followed by a darkening of the magical aura around her horn. She lowered her head and aimed at the crystal, firing a dark beam of magic directly into it.

Celestia took a deep breath as her magic faded and her eyes returned to normal. She watched the crystal intently. *"I hope it works..."*

She didn't have to wait long. Energy swirled inside the sphere, and then suddenly a shadow rose from the crystal inside it. The shadow rolled forward across the throne as Celestia stepped back, and then it followed the carpet down off the dais, sinking deeper into the floor. After about twenty feet of carpet was consumed it stopped and sank impossibly lower – opening a staircase into the floor.

Celestia looked at the staircase and then back to the throne, shaking her head. *"That's the entrance..."*

She walked over and looked down – the stairs spiraled around a large, very deep room. Cautiously she extended a hoof into the hole, noting how her hoof took on a shadowed look beyond the hole. She nodded to herself.

*"That's it, then. That must be his shadow realm."* She paused, looking back at the doorway. *"I wonder if I should search the castle first?"*

She considered further. *"I think Sombra's vision was important... hmm."* She withdrew her hoof and examined it. *"It seems okay... If I don't find anything I'll come back up."* She frowned. *"Well, if I can."*

She started down the staircase, feeling an instantaneous transition to much cooler air as her body submerged into the shadow. She followed the corkscrew of a staircase down for a minute or so before peering over the edge.

*"It's still so far... Well, since my wings do work again, I might as well just glide down."*

She stretched out her wings and stepped off the side of the stairs, letting her wings catch the air and tilt her body into a gentle glide. She spiraled downwards gracefully, making far better time than she had been while walking down the stairs. She smiled to herself as she alighted on the ground below.

*"Mmm, that felt wonderful. It's been too long since I've spread my wings. Well... as myself, anyway."*

She looked around herself, and was surprised to see both Sunset Shimmer and Sterling Honor standing side by side, staring at a rather

plain-looking wooden door. She frowned as she noticed the dark crystal mounted above the door.

"Of course," she muttered to herself. "Another trap."

She grit her teeth and focused the dark shadow magic to her horn once again. It took her a moment longer than last time to focus the darkness, but finally she was able to unleash a blast of shadow to the crystal over the door. Her eyes were just returning to normal as she heard Sunset's voice.

"Oooh," moaned Sunset. "My... my magic..."

Celestia smiled gently and walked towards her. "It's all right, my little pony. It wasn't real... it was an illusion – a trap."

Sunset's eyes widened and she broke into a beaming smile. "Princess Celestia!" she cried. "You're all right!" She ran towards Celestia and hugged her tightly.

Celestia's smile widened and she wrapped her wings forward around Sunset, nuzzling the back of Sunset's mane. "Yes. Thank you, Sunset Shimmer." Her head came up and she looked at Sterling Honor. He was now standing facing them, his body locked in a stiff at-attention stance. His eyes still looked distant.

Sunset turned her head back to look as well and seemed confused. "Oh no," she said. "Is he still in the trance?"

Celestia shook her head no and gently nudged Sunset to step aside, whispering to her. "*Let me address this...*"

Sunset nodded and released Celestia, quickly stepping aside as Celestia stepped closer to Sterling Honor. Quietly Sunset lit her horn, and smiled more widely when it responded to her.

Celestia spoke gently to Sterling, "Sterling Honor, I believe?"

Sterling's forelegs trembled slightly, although it was so well controlled that only Celestia noticed. All at once he dropped into a low bow. "Y-yes... Your Highness."

Celestia smiled gently. "At ease, Sterling Honor," she said. "This is not a time for formalities, you may rise."

Sterling made a strange sound, and then spoke quietly. "I... dare not, Your Highness."

"But why not?" asked Celestia.

"I... I betrayed you, Your Highness."

"Did you now?" Celestia responded. "And how did you do that?"

"I understand that what I saw was a vision," responded Sterling, still refusing to look up. "But it was true. I supported Nightmare Moon. I led the guard across all Equestria in support of her vision of Eternal Night."

"And you just tell me this, openly?" asked Celestia.

"I... I cannot do otherwise, Your Highness."

Celestia nodded, pretending to ponder this response. "Indeed," she mused. "And yet for all that... Equestria still stands, does it not?"

Sterling hesitated. "Y... yes," he replied slowly.

Celestia shook her head slowly. "Sterling Honor, this is ridiculous," she said. "I order you to raise your head and converse with me properly."

Sterling's head snapped up and he looked straight ahead again. "I... I cannot choose between you, Your Highness. I cannot choose!"

Celestia smiled softly and shook her head. "You do not have to, Sterling Honor."

Sterling gasped and looked, at last, directly to Celestia. "You do not mean... you... you defeated...?"

It was Celestia's turn to be surprised, but she recovered quickly and spoke more softly. "No... no, it did not work out that way. But I think... I hope... that Luna and I have made peace."

Sterling frowned and looked down at his hooves. "Things... cannot go back to the way they were for me."

Celestia frowned and watched him for a moment. *"This is taking too long,"* she thought. *"I don't have time to get through to him."* All at once an idea came to mind.

Celestia straightened up to her full height. She put on a stern face and snapped out an order crisp and abrupt. "Sterling Honor! Attention!"

Sterling snapped to attention without even thinking about it, his body naturally falling into the correct precise position, his eyes straight ahead.

Celestia stepped forward so that she was directly in his line of sight, and then lowered her head so that she could look into his eyes. "Sterling Honor, do you serve Equestria?" she demanded.

Sterling took a breath and replied with firm conviction. "Ma'am, yes Ma'am!"

Celestia nodded once and continued to speak directly. "Then pay attention. Equestria is not out of the woods yet. We are facing a threat from the shadow realm – the same threat that just entrapped you in whatever vision you were facing. But I need you to get over it – it was just an illusion. There is work to do. *Can* you get over it?"

Sterling responded again, without hesitation. "Ma'am, yes Ma'am!"

Celestia didn't nod this time, she just continued. "All right then. Listen up!" She turned her head to Sunset. "Sunset Shimmer, you too." She nodded towards the floor next to Sterling and Sunset came forward and stood there. After a moment Celestia frowned at her. Sunset started, then she understood and came to a reasonable representation of an attention stance. Celestia winked at her, and then continued.

"The threat that faces us is a unicorn named King Somba," Celestia lectured. "He exists primarily in the shadow realm, which is where we find ourselves now, and he makes extensive use of shadow magic. It's he who caused the Crystal Empire to disappear a thousand years ago, and now he's trying to return along with it."

Sunset glanced towards Sterling, who did not move although his ears were locked in a forward position. Sunset turned back to Celestia to continue listening.

"We believe that he does not yet have the power to return to the physical world, but before he gains that power we need to put in place a barrier to stop him. That barrier is an artifact called the Crystal Heart. We suspect that Sombra has hidden it away, and the intelligence I have suggests that this is where the search should begin."

"But there's nothing down here but that door," complained Sunset. "Where can we possibly start?"

Celestia smiled. "I'm glad you asked that," she replied. "I'm going to send the two of you through that door to search. It's the only path that makes any sense."

Sterling stamped a hoof for attention. "Ma'am!" he shouted. "Sunset Shimmer is a civilian. Shouldn't I go through by myself?"

Celestia shook her head. "If you truly betrayed me, Sterling Honor, then Sunset Shimmer's job will be to keep you in line." Sterling looked chagrined, and Celestia smiled gently. "Give her a chance. She will be very helpful to you, and it is too dangerous to send you alone."

Sunset stepped forward a step. "Aren't you coming with us?"

Celestia frowned and glanced back towards the crystal over the door. "I will need to stay here to disarm this trap. The fewer links Sombra has, I think the more difficult it will be for him to return. Then I will try to aid Luna on her quest. If you can locate the Crystal Heart, return it to its place under the castle. The rest... we will have to figure out."

Celestia winked at Sunset again as she used a wing to nudge her student back in line with Sterling, and her voice returned to firmness. "Do you understand your mission?" she demanded.

Sterling stomped a hoof. "Ma'am, yes Ma'am!" he shouted.

Celestia smiled and looked at Sunset pointedly.

"Um... yes Ma'am?" replied Sunset.

Celestia smirked. "Very well then," she said, turning around and spreading her wings. "Don't look at the door again until I've opened it, otherwise you'll be back in the trap again."

She didn't wait for a response, lighting her horn once again. After a moment, her golden aura went black again and after a moment longer a beam fired from her horn into the crystal. This time the beam was sustained, and she grit her teeth to hold it.

Sunset glanced at Sterling again, who was watching the spell with his jaw slightly open but otherwise still at attention.

The energy swirled around the crystal, leaking off it in small black sparks that faded as they emanated. All at once Celestia found the sequence she was looking for, and everything seemed to lock into place all at once. The energy soaked back into the crystal with a loud click and the door swung open.

"There!" grunted Celestia through her clenched jaw. "Go now!"

Sterling snapped into action immediately, snapping a look back to Sunset. "Let's go!" he ordered, and then charged forward.

Sunset blinked and hesitated a moment before she charged after him. "Hey, wait for me! Again!"

Sterling ran through the darkened opening without a moment's hesitation, but Sunset paused at the doorway to glance back at Celestia. "Hurry," requested Celestia.

Sunset frowned slightly. "How did you know that would work, Princess?"

Celestia smiled. "He's a soldier," she replied. "I think that I remember him. I'm pretty sure that he just likes to have something to do." She winked.

Sunset let a confident smirk cross her muzzle, and nodded to Celestia before turning and running through the doorway after Sterling.

Celestia sighed softly as Sunset disappeared from her sight and then she released the spell again. *"Good luck ponies,"* she thought to herself. *"If you can find the heart, I can find a way to help Luna."*

She looked up at the crystal again. *"But first,"* she mused, *"I need to slow Sombra down just a little."*

## Chapter 37 – Red on the Breeze

As Sunset passed through the doorway the shadows melted away and she found herself in another round room. She looked behind herself, but the doorway was a nearly-opaque blackness, she could see only shadows through it. Turning forward again, she saw that this room was similar to the previous one, except for being brighter, and it also had a staircase heading upwards along the walls. These walls were made of crystal instead of stone and reflected and refracted the moonlight all the way to the floor. Sunset squinted upwards and thought she could just make out the top.

"It's like a tower..." she commented. "Where are we?"

Sterling was standing there, waiting for her. "To be completely honest," he started, "I'm not entirely certain where we were before. So maybe you can tell me, where are we?"

Sunset shook her head. "Crystal Empire, remember? Celestia brought it back, and then you got trapped in a shadow illusion. For me I think it happened when the dark crystals caught up with me under the castle... maybe it was the same for you?"

Sterling frowned as he tried to remember. "Dark crystals... Crystal Empire...? No... no, none of that rings a bell. I was in the Crystal Mountains enroute to backup Princess Luna and... our train was stopped by a slide. I went to investigate something in the woods and... Ulfrid!" His eyes flashed and he looked up. "That *wolf* put me here! Where is he?"

Sunset looked surprised. "Ulfrid?" She spoke more gently. "No, that's impossible. We were with him right up until he... we lost him."

Sterling focused his glare on Sunset. "You *lost* him? What do you mean? Perhaps he slipped away to entrap me?"

Sunset shook her head. "No, I mean *lost*." She grimaced. "He succumbed to some kind of magic... I saw it happen. He aged and even though Princess Luna tried to heal him, he just... disintegrated."

Sterling frowned, but his glare softened. "Even Princess Luna could not save him? What magic was this?"

Sunset shook her head again. "We don't know... I didn't know Ulfrid well but it shook up Princess Luna pretty badly. She didn't want to go on... I had to convince her."

Sterling tilted his head. "You did that?"

"I had to," replied Sunset, "We are so close!"

Sterling looked down as he considered this. "Ulfrid always seemed a rival of sorts to me. I was jealous of him and suspected him of ulterior motives. But I did not expect him to die in the service of the Princess."

Sunset paused for a moment. "Princess Luna and Princess Celestia both said there was more to him than it appeared... perhaps you saw just enough of that to arouse suspicion."

Sterling looked up to Sunset again. "Princess *Celestia* knew Ulfrid too?"

Sunset blinked and bit her lip, realizing she'd said more than she meant to. "He... he visited us when we arrived at the caverns under Canterlot. He... took my spare birthday cupcake. This was just a day before you found us."

Sterling looked surprised for a moment, and then smiled enough to utter a small chuckle. "I am trying to imagine that enormous wolf with a birthday cupcake."

Sunset coughed back a chuckle of her own and then looked around again, trying to change the subject. "I wonder if we are in another part of the castle? That doorway may have been the entrance to an otherwise inaccessible area... that would explain the trap."

"Perhaps," responded Sterling. He frowned and then looked at Sunset with slight hesitation. "Do you know any spells for long distance communication? I have two squadrons in the Crystal Mountains that need instructions. There's no way I can cover the distances involved, I would normally send a pegasus."

Sunset shook her head again. "I can't... not that far. Even at full strength that would be pretty challenging. But maybe when we see Princess Celestia again she can help?"

Sterling frowned. "She seemed to be at less than full strength herself, but I suppose she is alicorn. Very well then." He trailed off and then stood quietly, watching Sunset.

Sunset eyed him carefully. "What?" she asked. "You're usually in such a hurry to get moving. What's the problem?"

Sterling's frown deepened. "The Princess put you in charge," he stated. "I'm... just waiting for your orders."

Sunset rolled her eyes. "Oh, come off it," she grumbled. "Just like that, you're all in line with the Princess of the Sun again?"

Sterling let out his breath in frustration and stomped his hoof again. "Not just like that!" he snapped. "No. I don't choose between one or the other. My duty lies with Equestria, whoever she may be following. So, I can't disobey a direct order from a Princess of Equestria, even if I'm not sure what the situation is with the other."

Sunset shook her head. "You can't expect me to believe that you were 'just following orders' for Nightmare Moon."

Sterling grit his teeth. "I *admire* Nightmare Moon, there is no question. But my *duty* overrides what I might want or not want to do. I already made this choice once, when Nightmare Moon took over, and now it appears that I will learn what that choice cost."

Sunset frowned, seeming unconvinced. "So, what's next for you, then?" she asked.

Sterling sat down and looked up towards the distant light. "That will depend on the Princesses, I suppose. Princess Celestia claims to have reconciled with Princess Luna. If that is true... then the era of Nightmare Moon has ended. It is... fair that those of us who supported her will be tried. I don't know what Princess Luna's view will be, but I know that I would not be in Celestia's favor."

Sunset grunted and tilted her head, watching him for a moment. "Do you think that helping Celestia and I now will buy you favor?"

Sterling shook his head. "In the illusion, I was confronted by both Princess Celestia and Nightmare Moon at the same time. They each accused me of betrayal and in front of the other, each demanded that I pledge my loyalty so that the other might punish me. I imagine that will be the case when this is all over with."

Sunset made a small sound as she relaxed her challenge, and then smiled. "Well, that was a much deeper illusion than mine... though, I'll admit it scared the hay out of me. In mine, I tried to wake you from the spell and it infected my horn, blocking all my magic. I couldn't even cast light!"

Sterling looked back to her again, and then nodded. "Well, at least yours was honorable."

"Was it?" asked Sunset. "The fear that the spell locked onto for me was losing my own magic; that's pretty selfish. For you, the spell locked onto whether you had betrayed the Princesses that you swore to protect. Some might say even worrying about that is worthy of some respect."

"I am not so convinced," replied Sterling, standing again.

"Anyway," continued Sunset. "It doesn't matter. It was just an illusion. It was a trick to throw you off and keep you distracted. And speaking of distracted..." Sunset got a mischievous look in her eyes. "I saw you looking at Celestia as she cast the shadow magic spell..."

Sterling's eyes widened and then he chuckled. "Hmm. I've never seen Princess Celestia use magic like that before. I would have thought her incapable. It was... eye-opening."

Sunset smiled. "You think she's all sunshine and happy thoughts, and Luna's your dark and brooding Queen, is that it?"

Sterling grimaced. "As always, you over-simplify to the point of ridiculousness."

Sunset shook her head, still smiling. "Trust me. Celestia has deeper and darker thoughts and concerns than even Nightmare Moon. But through it all... she only wants to protect Equestria." She paused and then added, "And her sister. To be honest I think I'd be afraid if she were forced to choose."

Sterling made a thoughtful sound and frowned. "All the same... her return was just as devastating as Nightmare Moon warned it would be. She was very nearly successful in destroying Nightmare Moon."

Sunset frowned now and shook her head. "She wasn't herself... she had the curse from that stupid amulet. For pony's sake, you should know all about that! Didn't you say it was corrupting your thoughts?"

Sterling nodded, slowly. "It twisted my desire to serve..." He trailed off there. After a moment, he looked up again. "We are wasting time. What do you know about this Crystal Heart?"

Sunset thought for a moment. "Well, Luna and Celestia both mentioned an artifact, although Luna didn't know what it was. The Crystal Heart would appear to be this artifact and I guess Celestia thinks it's through here. We have to take it down to the base of the castle and there's a little crystal mount for it right there in the open. Hopefully then it will turn on and voila! I have no idea after that."

Sterling smirked. "Well... not the most complete plan, but it is a plan." He looked up the stairs and then back to Sunset again, waiting.

Sunset stared at him for a moment, and then she sighed with exasperation. "Oh, for pony's sake. Will you just take charge already?"

Sterling tilted his head and smiled. "Is that an order, Ma'am?"

Sunset looked away in annoyance. "Oh, Celestia!" she grumbled. "Yes! Go! This is what you *live* for."

Sterling grinned and then looked up the staircase. "In that case," he announced, "move out!" He broke into an immediate gallop and hit the stairs at a full run.

Sunset grumbled and started after him. "Yep, move out," she repeated. "Sterling Honor's love for stairs can never be sated! Oh, for... *wait up!*"

"Come on, Sunset Shimmer," called Sterling. "I thought you could keep up! Don't disappoint me now!"

Sunset grumbled as she climbed the stairs, looking at the hundreds of feet above them. "No, just... wait... slow down! Oh, to Tartarus with this!" She ran hard, getting to within a dozen feet of Sterling Honor and then lit her horn brightly. She focused as high up as she could see, and then without further warning the two of them winked out, only to wink back in much closer to the top.

Sterling stumbled in surprise, allowing Sunset to catch up. "What's the matter, Captain?" she teased. "Can't handle a mid-gallop teleport?"

Sterling recovered his hooves as quickly as he could, and then shook his head at her. "You could have given me a little warning!" he snapped.

Sunset laughed. "Ah, like your three-two-one-GO countdowns to full-on gallop. You're just grumpy that I'm going to beat you this time! Or do you want me to wink you back down so that you can enjoy the stairs you missed?"

The two of them slowed rapidly as they reached the top of the staircase, peeking carefully into the room. They had indeed reached the top of a tower – a small round room no more than thirty feet across. It was covered with a ceiling but largely open to the air on every side, letting the silvery moonlight stream in. The staircase itself opened via a small slit in the floor along the wall while the rest of the room was completely barren, except for the very center. There hovered a large, pale blue crystal carved in the shape of a heart. The moonlight bounced within its translucent shape and radiated outwards, casting a light blue glow on the floor around it.

Sunset and Sterling looked at each other and carefully stepped onto the floor. "That's got to be it," noted Sunset as she stepped forward.

Sterling lifted a foreleg to stop her. "Wait," he instructed. "It can't possibly be this easy. We've already triggered one trap. I'll get it."

Sunset stepped back and smirked. "For glory, huh?"

"Shh!" replied Sterling as he started to advance. "For once, knock off the taunting. Risk is my job." He stepped carefully, each hoofstep testing the floor before he settled his weight onto it. He advanced slowly, one step at a time, and as he drew near the heart Sunset found herself holding her breath.

Finally, he was there in the center of the room, his face reflected in the crystal of the Heart. It hovered just inches from him and did not move as he carefully circled it. Once he had reached the far side of the heart he stopped and nodded to Sunset. "All right," he whispered. "Let's see now..."

His muscles tensed, and slowly he raised his hoof and reached forward until his hoof touched the Heart. A second later he let his breath out, as did Sunset. "Nothing," he said. "It just feels like crystal."

He lit his horn and captured the heart in his magical field, lifting it slightly from where it hovered. "Nothing holding it here," he mumbled. "Maybe just a simple balancing spell..."

Sunset nodded. "Well, all right then, be careful with it."

Sterling smiled. "Well, since you are in charge, why don't you carry it?" His expression grew more serious. "That will keep me free to counter anything that does come up on us on the way back down."

Sunset smirked. "Fine, fine... I'll carry it. Then you can gallop all the way back down again, like I know you want to."

Sterling rolled his eyes and brightened his levitation field, floating the heart over to Sunset. Sunset lit her own horn and captured the heart in her own field. "I've got it, you can let go," she said.

Sterling nodded and his spell faded out. There was a sudden crash and the sound of shattering crystal filled the room. All at once a ring of jagged black crystals erupted around the center of the room, hiding Sterling from Sunset's sight.

"Oh no! Not again!" cried Sunset. A second ring of crystals erupted from the floor around the first, causing the tower to shake. She turned to run for the stairs, only to have a ragged shaft of black crystal erupt from the staircase, blocking her path.

She turned around again, but the rings of crystals from the center of the room were growing closer, boxing her in against the staircase. Desperately she looked around. There was a clear path to the outside and she ran for it, the crystals slamming in behind her.

She reached the opening and looked outside. The tower dropped hundreds of feet to the ground far below, and a narrow ledge of smooth

crystal ran around the outside. Glancing behind her she saw the dark crystal rings just a couple of feet away, with random spikes jutting up as she watched. She gingerly hopped out onto the ledge, holding the heart away from the tower with her magic and trying to balance as she walked around the ring, away from the onrushing crystal.

*"Horse apples!" she thought. "I can't wink with an artifact, I don't know what it will do! How am I going to WHAAAAA!"*

A heavy vibration shook the tower and her hooves slipped right off the rim. She caught the edge with her fore hooves and clung as tightly as she could. *"Oh no, oh no, oh no! I've got to wink... I can't focus on a destination...! Levitation! Come on horn!!!"*

With a loud shattering crash, the dark crystals erupted through the sides of the tower opening, shaking it hard, and Sunset's grip slipped. She found herself in freefall, her only instincts to clench her eyes tightly shut. She brought the Crystal Heart closer and wrapped herself around it to avoid losing it as she fought the panic. *"No! No! Nononono!! Focus, dammit!"*

Suddenly she felt the warmth of a body against her and the wind stopped rushing past her ears. She gasped and opened her eyes, looking right into the smiling, goggled face of Corporal Stratosphere.

"Hey, Sunny," he grinned. "I saw you 'hanging around' and decided to be ready in case you wanted to 'drop in'."

Sunset's eyes went wide and tears formed at the corners. "When we get down," she said in quiet gratitude, "I'm going to punch you for that pun. But right now, I think I'm going to kiss you!"

Stratosphere smirked. "That's not much incentive to take you down, Sunny," he teased.

Sunset shook her head. "Come on, we have to restore this artifact under the castle. All Equestria's at stake."

Stratosphere banked and started to circle downwards towards the castle. "All right, all right. It's a good thing I decided to come see what was going on. But I'd rather have that kiss than the WHOA!"

A sharp, narrow tower of dark crystal erupted from the ground, shooting up a hundred feet in a second and narrowly missing as Stratosphere banked. He glanced downward, seeing a second and then a third pillar erupting towards them.

"Dude, what's going on? Whatever you've got there, these things want it! We've got to climb out of reach!"

Sunset clung tightly to Stratosphere's body as he angled upwards and pumped his wings. He climbed rapidly, but as Sunset glanced down she saw one more pillar heading right for them. "Watch out!" she shouted.

Stratosphere glanced downwards but it was already too late. The pillar of dark crystal slammed into them with enough force to knock them even further skyward. Rather than shattering on impact it rapidly formed a large spiked cage around them, locking them in tightly. Stratosphere screamed in pain.

***"My wing, dude! It smashed my wing!"***

Sunset gasped and pushed herself to her hooves. "*Trapped!*" she thought, panicking. They were trapped in a small sphere constructed of dark crystal no more than five feet across, with bar-like spires all around them. Sunset glanced around the newly formed cage and was relieved to see that the Heart was trapped with them. She then peered over the edge towards the ground. They were easily as high as the original tower, perched atop a narrow, meandering pillar of menacing dark crystal.

Sunset took a moment to compose herself, focusing on a level part of the crystal just outside the cage. Her horn lit and she winked out, reappearing outside the cage. As soon as her hooved touched down, however, she was tugged back, phasing through the spires that defined the cage and dropped right back in the center again.

"*There's no getting out!*" she realized. But she took a moment to catch her breath and soon she realized that there was no more sound of crashing crystal, no more shaking or crystalline eruptions. The attack was over, for the moment.

She let her focus return to reality and turned to face Stratosphere, who was whimpering and tugging on his wing. It was twisted and caught between the spires of the cage, and Sunset was not sure that it hadn't actually been punched right through.

"Shh! Shh!" called Sunset. "Stop tugging on it, let me have a look. I have medical training."

"Oh stars, Sunny!" begged Stratosphere. "Please help me! It really hurts!"

"Call me Sunset," said Sunset softly. She looked at the wing carefully. Stratosphere was still twitching a lot which made it hard to be certain, but it looked very damaged. "Tell me your name?"

Stratosphere's eyes shrank and he stared at her, dumbfounded. "I never told you my name?" he asked.

Sunset tried to think back... she thought that he might have but she couldn't remember what it was. Still, he'd stopped struggling for the moment and Sunset hoped he might be distracted enough for the extraction.

"I... don't think so?" she replied brightly, lighting her horn and starting to wrap her magical field around the wing.

"Oh, dude!" exclaimed Stratosphere. "No *wonder* you would barely talk to me! You didn't even know who I am! I'm so *stupid*! Dude, my name's Strato-**OOOWWWW!**"

Sunset completed her initial examination while Stratosphere was talking, and shifted the broken bones to pull the wing back from the twisted crystal that entrapped it. She was not the least bit surprised when Stratosphere howled – she was certain that it had to be extremely painful. The crystal had captured and twisted the wing in a hundred places, shattering the bones and deforming it badly. But she wasn't done yet.

"Strato what?" she encouraged, as if she hadn't noticed the scream.

Tears streamed from Stratosphere's eyes, but he clenched his jaw as Sunset's magical field tried to shift the bone fragments into place. "St... Strato... sphere!" he stuttered between breaths.

"Hello, Stratosphere," said Sunset gently as she did her best to position the shattered wing against his body. "I wish we'd met under better circumstances."

"Ow!" whimpered Stratosphere. "Oh, dude, OW! Oh, dude, it hurts!"

Sunset frowned softly. "You're going to be fine," she comforted. "I can't do much more for you up here... but once we get down you'll be fine." She frowned, knowing it was a lie. "I can put you to sleep, to help the pain? I don't have enough magic to do much more." she offered.

Stratosphere looked at her, frowning and biting back the pain. "I..." he panted... "this might be... my only chance... to spend time with you!" He managed a crooked grin through the obvious pain.

Sunset half-smiled and shook her head. "That's almost sweet," she replied. "But really stupid." She lit her horn and leaned in to touch it to his forehead. "You go to sleep now."

## Chapter 38 – Moonset

***"Show yourself! I will tear this dream apart!"***

Luna shouted down the hallway of the dream realm's castle, surrounded by crystal and darkness. Although she had sensed something close while she was talking to Celestia, since taking over the dream she had not sensed anything at all. Was the creature even still here? She wasn't sure, but she was fairly certain that something else was still sharing the dream energy. She needed to engage with it.

She mused as she stalked down the hallway, her head down and her horn leading the way. She didn't need to use any magic to see ahead, but she lit her horn faintly in order to enhance her search anyway.

*"Celestia," she mused. "She asked me to forgive her... as if she was the one who took over Equestria. And I did forgive her... it felt so important that I did."*

She giggled to herself as she remembered Celestia's fear, but the giggle faded quickly as she put together the pieces in her mind. *"She was scared of Nightmare Moon... no, terrified. I did my research well... maybe too well. I didn't really think about how deep those fears would go."*

She adjusted her focus back to the dream, listening to the sound of her own hoofsteps. They still sounded correct so she returned to her thoughts. *"I don't think I liked seeing her that frightened."*

*"We were meant to rule together... that's what she said. I would... have to allow the sun... wouldn't I? But she's back now. The sun isn't a threat anymore, is it?"*

*"I must focus."*

She stopped that train of thought and refocused her attention on the dream. She still sensed no other presence, and the lack of results was beginning to frustrate her. In annoyance, she stomped her hoof against the hallway's floor. All at once the crystal shattered underneath her. With a gasp of surprise, she fell through, falling into the darkness to an unseen bottom far below. She tried to spread her wings and found that she could not coerce them to open, and flailed her hooves helplessly.

*"What is this?!"* she wondered, startled. *"Why won't my wings work?"*

She landed with a thud in a large, dark room. Several high windows let in the moonlight, casting square patches of light on the floor, but otherwise even Luna could see nothing. She panted softly, feeling some pain in her chest from the impact, and pushed herself to a standing

position. All at once her hoof broke through the floor, splashing into a thick, sticky tar-like substance that held her firm. Unexpectedly she found all four hooves trapped in the floor.

"What!?" she cried. "How is this possible?!"

*"Sorry to keep you waiting."* A deep voice echoed through the room. *"I had a little something to take care of before I could entertain you... but it's all locked up now."*

Luna tugged on her hooves, but the sticky substance had seeped around her armor and held her fast. A motion across the room caught her attention and she looked up to see a regally dressed unicorn step into one of the moonlit squares.

"Sombra," she hissed. "So, it *is* you."

Sombra chuckled as he stopped, the moonlight reflecting off his brightly polished armor. "And you are Princess Luna," he purred. "Or perhaps, if I see you correctly, Nightmare Moon? The *real* Nightmare Moon?" He chuckled. "You've upgraded your appearance since a thousand years ago. Even your sister was frightened of you. It was... delicious."

Luna frowned. "Mere words, Sombra. Is that all the power you've managed to steal?"

Sombra clicked his tongue and smiled sweetly. "You're a little smaller than Celestia imagined you, though. Oh... it was brilliant of you to release Celestia and take over her dream. I didn't even know that it was possible to release somepony and keep the dream going. But between her, and your companions, I've got enough. Once I drain you I will be able to restore my Crystal Army."

"There was no army!" objected Luna. "You're delusional!"

"Oh... I was close," accepted Sombra. "But you won't be there to stop me this time. Not you, not your sister."

Luna tugged at her hooves again, grunting with the effort. "I'm not going to let you!" she protested.

Sombra chuckled. "Oh... what are you going to do? A 'friendship beam'? You, who've pushed away every pony who ever loved you. Who just lost her last friend to the wind?"

Luna gasped. "What! What do you know about it?"

Sombra started to advance, stepping slowly. "I can see into your heart, Princess Luna. I know that you are not Nightmare Moon, you have

lost that power. I know your fears and concerns. And I know that you shall die here, alone, just like you fear."

Luna frowned. "No! Celestia has forgiven me!"

"*Forgiven* you," taunted Sombra. "So that you can return to her side, the little sister that never gets to speak at fancy dinners... or formal confrontations."

Luna glared and lit her horn. "Stop trying to distract me, this isn't about me! This is about you! Prepare yourself!"

"Too late!" replied Sombra. "Too little, too late!" His own horn lit and he struck out, a dark beam blasting forward from his horn. It struck Luna squarely in the chest and expanded into a massive dark sphere, engulfing her and drawing her power outwards.

Luna grunted and shrank under the impact of the spell, and the dark sphere enclosed her and became opaque. It began to glow an eerie glow as the power transferred.

Sombra chuckled as he drew closer. "It's so much easier when I can be direct. When your fear is fear itself... I don't need to mess around with metaphors and illusions. Don't worry, Princess Luna. This won't take very long."

Luna's voice came weakly from the sphere. "You... you won't get away with this Sombra..."

"Not to be too trite," chuckled Sombra, "but I already have."

"No," replied Luna, her voice suddenly stronger and somehow deeper. She laughed, her voice full and dark. "No, I really mean it."

Sombra stopped abruptly, taking half a step back. "What?"

The sphere's glow suddenly inverted, drawing into the darkness and lighting it from the inside. Luna's silhouette grew visible, her head down and her body hunched. The sphere began to shrink as she absorbed it.

"You may have glanced into my heart, Sombra," she began. "But you should have learned who I was, instead of focusing on my doubts."

She started to grow inside the sphere, her voice growing louder and stronger. "Don't you want to know?"

She raised her head and spread her wings, growing to her full size as the last of the sphere soaked into her body. Her coat was midnight black once again, her eyes glowed with the brightness of the moon and as

she smiled her fangs gleamed in the moonlight. Nightmare Moon stood again in all her glory.

Sombra took a second step backwards and then stepped forward again, aiming his horn. "Illusions won't work on me!" he snarled, firing a blast of darkness directly at her.

The blast struck Nightmare Moon square in the chest, and she absorbed the splash-back of magical energy. She started to advance on Sombra. "Shadow magic," she sneered. "How *cute*."

Sombra froze for a moment and then took another half step backwards. His face was determined, however. "Don't underestimate me!" he snarled, firing another blast at her.

Nightmare Moon deflected the blast with a casual wave of her hoof and it slammed into the wall at the side of the room. She continued to step forward. "You don't even know who I am," she taunted.

Sombra continued to back away, but Nightmare Moon showed no urgency in her advance. "You, who plays in the shadows like a naughty child," she continued. "But I... I am the darkness. I *am* the night. I *own* the powers that you merely toy with. Look into my heart now, Sombra. See who I am."

Sombra's expression was twisting between certainty and doubt. "You're good," he offered with fading confidence in his voice. "But it's a trick..."

Nightmare Moon's horn lit brightly and she caused the entire room to begin to glow. Sombra glanced nervously at the floor as Nightmare spoke again. "Perhaps," she teased. "But let's just see what's in *your* heart..."

The glow of the room brightened rapidly, until it was too much and Sombra closed his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, he was looking into the square underneath the Crystal Castle. The Crystal Heart spun lazily on its mounts, gleaming as it occasionally caught the glow of a bright moon and reflected it across the square.

As he watched, a shadowy figure wearing a dark cloak crept into the square, looking from side to side. The figure slowly approached the heart, drawing a sack. All at once Sombra heard a voice at his side.

"So," commented Nightmare Moon. "This is how you captured the Crystal Empire?"

Sombra managed not to jump only by extreme force of will. He responded after a moment. "This is not what I would have done to you," he replied.

Nightmare Moon clicked her tongue. "I wanted to see for myself."

"So, this is a dream?" asked Sombra.

"Nothing so simple," replied Nightmare Moon.

"Then what?" demanded Sombra. "Why can't I summon any magic?"

Nightmare Moon shook her head. "I have submerged us too deeply for you to do that." She raised a hoof, pointing over into the square. "Look, somepony approaches."

"Princess Amore," commented Sombra with a grumble.

The two of them watched a tall alicorn confront the figure in the square. Although words did not carry, they could see that the hooded figure was agitated.

"She seems to be trying to reason with you," observed Nightmare Moon.

"She was taunting me," growled Sombra. "She could have saved me years earlier."

The view shifted as the words brought a related memory to the forefront. Nightmare Moon watched as a much younger unicorn with a strong resemblance to Sombra suffered in bed. He groaned and writhed, soaked in sweat as a pretty young mare tended to him with concern in her eyes. Sombra's voice came through the memory.

*"Every year during the Crystal Faire the ponies would charge up the Crystal Heart with their love and kindness. The power would tear through me and nopony understood why."*

Nightmare Moon didn't reply as the flashback faded away, returning to the scene under the castle. Suddenly the cloaked figure took an offensive stance towards the alicorn that faced him. His horn flared brightly with purple magic which cracked and sparked like electricity. Without delay the bolt arced over to the alicorn and abruptly she was encased in dark crystal, frozen solid.

"Princess Amore knew what I was, though," commented Sombra as they watched. "She chose to do nothing."

"And what were you?" asked Nightmare Moon, seemingly unmoved by the spell they had just observed.

"A monster," replied Sombra. "I'm surprised you don't know that."

"I know it," replied Nightmare Moon. "But I don't know why."

The scene flashed back again. They watched a young Sombra running away from the Crystal Empire and coming across a large red crystal.

*"I was born that way," commented Sombra as the crystal flashed in communication. The colt in the illusion reacted as if surprised. "A living shadow, who was created only to destroy the Crystal Heart and free the rest of my kind. I realized that the only way to end the pain was to fulfill my destiny."*

Again the flashback ended and returned to the original scene. The cloaked figure was starting to leave the square with the Heart safely secured in his sack when a crystal pony entered the square and stopped abruptly, saying something. She went between the alicorn encased in crystal and the hooded figure several times, seeming anxious.

"And who is that?" asked Nightmare Moon.

"She is nopony," replied Sombra.

The hooded Sombra in the square dropped his hood, making his identity clear to the two observers. He reached forward and caressed the crystal pony's chin.

"You are very gentle with this nopony," observed Nightmare Moon.

Sombra growled. "I said she was nopony."

All at once the hooded Sombra stomped the ground and flared his horn, and the crystallized alicorn shattered, sending pieces flying in all directions. The crystal pony reacted with horror and ran tearfully from the square. The hooded Sombra only watched her leave, then raised himself to his full height and stepped purposefully out of the square.

"She came to us," commented Nightmare Moon. "I know who she was to you... or at least who you were to her."

Sombra grunted and turned his head. "It doesn't matter. I did what I was meant to do."

The scene faded out and swirled around them. "Let us see what you would choose to do next..." commented Nightmare Moon.

All around them the world began to settle back into a semblance of order. Ahead of them was a flat snow-covered plain. In regular ranks stood an army of crystal ponies, outfitted with armor made of dark, solid crystal. Behind them on a large dais stood King Sombra, wearing his own regal armor.

Sombra smiled to Nightmare Moon. "The beginning of our invasion," he explained. "It's exactly how I always imagined it."

"This *is* how you imagine it," replied Nightmare Moon. Her horn flared again. "I have seen enough."

Again, the world swirled around them, and the bright white of the snow field faded slowly to black. At last the two of them stood in total darkness with only the faint light of Nightmare Moon's horn to provide any illumination at all.

"There is no escape from here," explained Nightmare Moon. "We are deep inside your own life force. Not unlike my banishment to the moon, your own power will aid in keeping you locked away. Even if you do manage to learn which way is up, it will take you hundreds of years to learn to move, hundreds longer to regain enough strength to start."

"So that's it?" asked Sombra. "It was over when you took over Celestia's dream, wasn't it?"

Nightmare Moon smiled. "Not quite. You had me when you reconnected to me – you even caught me off guard. But once you interacted with me, you gave me control..." She paused and then shook her head. "But really... the bit where I was falling and I couldn't open my wings? That's a nightmare for baby pegasi."

Sombra smiled a little bit. "It's surprisingly effective... but I have never had anypony turn it around on me before."

Nightmare Moon nodded slowly. "Dreams are my domain."

Sombra frowned. "I should have known when you attacked my shadow in Celestia's dream. I just assumed that she was putting up a barrier and fighting back. When did I lose my magic?"

Nightmare Moon paused as she considered whether to explain, and then chose to do so. "When you further attacked me, you handed all your stolen magic to me to manage as I saw fit. I have already withdrawn your influence in the waking world."

Sombra shook his head. "So... another thousand years of exile and torture."

Nightmare Moon nodded. "It is likely what you deserve most. But should I punish you for what fate handed you?"

Sombra looked at her and frowned. "You taunt me."

"No," replied Nightmare Moon. Her horn brightened and Sombra could suddenly see another pony standing behind her. The other pony stepped forward and her crystal body caught Nightmare Moon's light.

Sombra gasped and leaned forward for a closer look. "Hope?" he asked.

The pony smiled and stepped closer to Sombra, nodding.

"Radiant Hope, if I recall correctly," added Nightmare Moon. "It is promising that you remember the name of such a 'no pony'."

Sombra blinked and looked back at Nightmare Moon, confused.

"She is not real," continued Nightmare Moon. "But I leave her here in your dream to see if she can change your heart. When I return, then we shall see what you have become."

Sombra looked back at Radiant Hope, who stepped forward again hesitantly, smiling. "But... why?"

Nightmare Moon frowned. "Because I remember being alone. Farewell, Sombra."

Nightmare Moon watched Sombra step towards the crystal pony as she returned herself back to the waking world. The view faded for her and went black.

Then she awoke and she found herself once again clad in the dark blue coat of her younger form. Her helmet felt uncomfortable and she removed it, dropping it to the floor. Then she looked around. She was still in the tower room that she had entered when she had parted ways with Sunset Shimmer, although the window that she had flown through was once again clear and allowed moonlight to flood into the room.

Princess Luna stood and stretched, listening carefully. She heard nothing, so she lit her horn for a moment in order to sense around herself. At first she detected nothing, so she expanded her search. Eventually she thought that she felt several ponies outside in the square – and no sign of King Sombra. She walked over to the window and leapt out, spreading her wings to glide down and meet them.

## Chapter 39 – Sunrise

Sunset stowed the Crystal Heart in her saddlebag and frowned as she scanned the crystal cage that she was trapped in. She had left Stratosphere sleeping in the center while she investigated the edges. It was tight, but there was just enough room to avoid stepping on him.

She didn't have a great deal of magic left available to her, but any spell she had tried was simply absorbed. Now she was moving more slowly, physically pressing on the crystal spikes and testing any weakness she thought that she noticed. So far, nothing had so much as wiggled.

*"I can't give up," she thought to herself. "There's no such thing as a perfect trap."*

She paused for a third time in front of a particularly thin-looking spike of crystal, and tapped it thoughtfully. It ran from the base of the cell almost to the ceiling, but it didn't connect at the top. It looked as though it should snap right off, but tapping it and pushing on it hadn't yielded any results.

She pondered as she scanned the length of the spike right to its tip. *"What if I used a gravity spell to stand on the ceiling, and just give it a really good kick? I'd only need to hold myself for a few seconds... I think I can do that."*

Decision made, she lit her horn and jumped into the air. At the peak of her jump she rolled over in mid-air and resumed falling – upwards. With a light thump, she landed on the ceiling of the pen. She glanced back at Stratosphere.

*"Okay, I just have a few seconds... I sure hope I don't fall on him. He's bound to take that the wrong way... Anyway..."*

She turned around and faced away from the spike in question, and lined up her hooves. She crouched slightly and then took a deep breath, shooting her hind legs out with all her might.

***CRACK!***

With an incredible noise the crystal snapped, falling out into space. Sunset gave a little cheer and jumped back into the air, reversing her gravity spell and landing safely on the cage's floor. The spike had snapped off right at the base, leaving an opening just wide enough for a pony to squeeze through, if she held her breath.

Sunset grinned and turned back to Stratosphere, lighting her horn one more time and touching it to his forehead. "Wake up," she whispered.

Stratosphere groaned and blinked his eyes a couple of times. "What... huh?" he asked. "What's going on?"

"We're getting out of here," replied Sunset, pointing back to the opening she had created.

Stratosphere pushed himself to a sitting position, wincing as he did. "Oh dude... I don't know if it's 'cause you knocked me out, but I've got this wicked rumbling sound in my ears."

"Rumbling sound...?" asked Sunset. "There shouldn't be any..."

She stopped and listened. There *was* a rumbling sound. She also noticed that the base of the cage was vibrating slightly under her hooves.

"I didn't kick it *that* hard..."

She stuck her head through the empty space between the spikes and looked down, and then gasped. All the dark crystals in the kingdom were crumbling into the ground, collapsing into small piles of dust. At the base of the massive tower the two of them were trapped in, the crystals were just beginning to vibrate and shatter.

"This tower's coming down!" she shouted back to Stratosphere. "We have to get down NOW. Come on!"

Stratosphere's eyes widened. "I... I don't know how to climb! Dude, I *always* fly!"

Sunset growled in frustration. "We don't have time! Follow me and do your best. We'll make it!"

Sunset scanned beneath herself rapidly and spotted a somewhat level piece of crystal about four feet down. She took a deep breath and jumped towards it. She landed squarely, skidding just a little, but she was able to catch herself. She moved a bit to the side.

"Come on!" she shouted. She thought that the vibrations were more pronounced now. "Just jump."

Stratosphere's head poked through the spikes of the cage, looking very nervous. After a moment, he nodded and jumped from the cage. Instinctively he tried to spread his wings. His good wing spread wide but his injured wing flapped, causing him to cry out in pain. He banked abruptly as his good wing caught the wind, and Sunset reached out her magic to grab him and pull him back to the ledge.

"Don't use your wings!" she shouted.

"Ow, I'm right here, dude," whimpered Stratosphere. "I couldn't help it, but trust me. That hurt so much I'm not going to do it again."

Sunset looked downwards. They still had a long way to go. She chose the next landing spot and pointed. "We're going to move faster from here on," she explained. "I might not be able to catch you again, so just keep moving and don't think about it."

Stratosphere nodded. "Yes, Ma'am," he replied, smiling. "I'm ready."

Sunset nodded in response, and the tower swayed gently. "We're really out of time," she gasped, and then leapt. As she landed she immediately scanned down for another suitable platform, and then leapt again. She glanced back quickly and breathed a sigh of relief to see Stratosphere landing safely on the previous platform, this time keeping his wings in check.

*"Okay," she thought to herself. "Just focus on the next jump. Keep moving. We can do this."*

She continued her pattern of jumping, scanning, and then jumping again, making rapid progress. After just ten jumps she took a moment to check her progress.

*"Good progress! This might work after all!"*

Right then the tower gave a mighty groan, tilting to the side and not swaying back this time. It hesitated a moment, and then there was the sound of thousands of shattering crystals beneath them. The tower resumed its motion, slowly accelerating its sideways motion as it began to fall.

"Sunny!" shouted Stratosphere.

Sunset scrambled as she tried to hold her grip on the tilting crystal. *"It's okay,"* she tried to reassure herself. *"Just look for the crystals that are going to be level when you land..."*

She jumped again, managing her landing as planned, but the fall of the tower was rapidly overtaking her ability to hold on. She had no solid purchase as the entire tower broke off at the base and began to freefall, leaving her in midair. She closed her eyes and screamed, having nothing left to try.

For the second time that day she felt her fall aborted by a warm body, and opened her eyes to see Celestia's smiling face.

"Nice of you to drop in," Celestia teased.

Sunset panted with the rush of adrenaline in her body. "Is that the only pun available for this situation?"

Celestia looped around, dodging a large piece of falling crystal, and then hooked underneath Stratosphere, letting him land squarely on her back. To Sunset's surprise, he gave a little cheer and held on loosely as Celestia banked away from the falling tower, and then began to circle downwards.

Stratosphere hopped off as Celestia alighted gently next to the castle, and he gave her a somewhat sloppy salute with his good wing. "Thanks for the ride, dude!"

Sunset climbed down somewhat more gingerly and spent a moment just enjoying the touch of earth underneath her hooves – even if it was crystalline. But at Stratosphere's words her ears perked. "Dude?" she questioned. "This is Princess Celestia and you should know that! You tried to arrest her, after all!"

"Wait... what?" asked Stratosphere. He seemed genuinely confused, but he looked back to Celestia. "Princess...?"

Celestia nodded once, and Stratosphere dropped into a bow. "Sorry, Your Highness Ma'am. Thank you for catching me."

Sunset's eyebrows raised and she smiled. "So, you can show respect after all."

Celestia patted Sunset's back with her wing and smiled gently. "Enough teasing, Sunset Shimmer. All is well and this is hardly a time for being formal." She looked back to Stratosphere. "Please rise, we still have a lot of work to do."

Stratosphere rose slowly and then looked somewhat hesitant. "Um... not to be rude, Ma'am dude... but where's the Queen?"

Celestia looked at Stratosphere's wing and frowned. "You are injured." She lit her horn, examining it.

"Yes, Ma'am," replied Stratosphere. "It's my wing. It... it kind of hurts a lot."

Celestia frowned as she nodded. "I cannot repair it... but I can bind it. Hold still." Her horn lit as she cast a spell to lock his wing against his body. As she worked, she continued speaking. "Princess Luna is taking care of another matter here in the Empire. She will join us when she's done."

"Join us...?" asked Stratosphere. "So... Nightmare Moon and you made up?"

Celestia nodded. "I'd like to believe so." Her spell ended and she took a step back.

Stratosphere's expression grew into a wide smile. "For real?"

Celestia chuckled softly. "Yes, for real," she replied.

"Really?" asked Stratosphere again, bouncing a little in place.

Sunset frowned. "Knock it off, Stratosphere." She looked around herself. Most of the dark crystals around the castle had fallen already, and the dust was beginning to settle. "Princess," she asked. "What's going on with the crystals?"

Celestia grinned and winked at Stratosphere. "Really," she whispered in reply. She then turned back to Sunset and frowned a little, shaking her head. "I'm not sure," she offered slowly. "If I had to guess... I'd think that whoever is behind them needs his power elsewhere... but I'd rather not go into detail."

Sunset frowned. "Is... that what Princess Luna is doing?"

Celestia hesitated, and then shook her head. "Right now, our job is to retrieve the Crystal Heart. Were you able to locate it? Is it in a place where we can reach it?"

Sunset smiled. "Closer than you think, Princess." She opened her saddlebag and levitated the Heart out, bringing it out around in front of her.

Celestia's eyes widened. "Excellent work, Sunset Shimmer." She paused for a moment and then tilted her head. "What of the Captain of the Guard? He did travel with you, did he not?"

Sunset blinked and then gasped. "Yes! He was stuck up in the tower. Princess, we need to fly up there and get him down."

Celestia looked back up to the tower. "Is he injured?"

Sunset shook her head. "I don't think so, but he was trapped by the crystals. They just sprang up from the floor when he passed the Heart to me."

"More traps," mused Celestia. "If we are fortunate, we should be clear of traps for a little while. Longer, if Luna is successful." She paused for a moment, and then looked back to Sunset. "Do you know where the Crystal Heart is to be set?"

Sunset nodded, pointing towards the square. "There's a set of mounts for it in the center of the square."

"Very well," replied Celestia. "You install the Heart, I will fetch the Captain of the Guard." She smiled. "It's really very nice to have my wings back."

Celestia launched herself into the air and Sunset turned to Stratosphere. "Come on, then, let's get this done before something else happens."

Stratosphere watched Celestia climb into the air with a wistful look. "I'm going to miss that," he said quietly.

Sunset paused. "Oh, come on now, you're going to be fine."

Stratosphere shook his head and looked over at his shattered wing. "Do you think I don't know how bad it is, dude? Like, I've been flying my whole life, and I've been flying dangerously. I've seen dudes get their wings messed up before. It's never going to be the same."

Sunset frowned for a moment. She agreed with him, but she still wanted to sound positive. "Well... maybe. But you're tough. You'll figure it out!"

Stratosphere sighed softly, but he allowed a smile to cross his muzzle. "Well, I figured one thing out. You and me... we're never going to be something, are we?"

Sunset froze and blinked a couple of times. It sounded so cruel and yet it was completely true in her own mind. Slowly she nodded. "That's... true. I'm sorry."

Stratosphere grinned crookedly. "Don't even worry about it, man. I mean, you gave me plenty of hints, right? Gave me a fake name, kept running away, and knocked me out twice now." He chuckled. "I don't want there to be a third time. But dude..." He raised his hoof, indicating that he was waiting for a 'brohoof'. "Friends?"

Sunset paused. She thought about pointing out that most of those events were because she was on the run from the law and he was the law. But in the end, she decided against it and broke into a smile of her own. She slapped her hoof against Stratosphere's and nodded. "Friends," she confirmed. "Now we had better get this Heart installed."

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Celestia reached up into the air and pulled it back across her body with her wings, relishing the sensation of being able to fully stretch them out. It was over all too quickly as she reached the top of the crystal tower in just a few moments and began to circle around it. It did not take long to spot Sterling Honor standing near one of the openings, looking downwards. As she flew near he noticed her and stepped back, dropping quickly into a bow.

Celestia banked and flew towards him, pulling back at the last moment so that she could land lightly through the opening. She smiled gently as she folded her wings and approached Sterling.

"Captain Sterling Honor," she opened. "Are you injured?"

Sterling replied without raising his head. "No, Your Majesty."

Celestia nodded once. "Stand up now, Sterling Honor. Climb onto my back, and I will take you down to join the others."

Sterling raised his head, and then reacted with surprise. "On your back? Highness, I could not possibly!"

"Of course you can," responded Celestia. "You will not impose any burden."

"It's not proper!" protested Sterling.

Celestia refrained from rolling her eyes. "We have a window of quiet, Captain, but we do not know how long it will last. This is not a good time to debate what is or is not proper."

Sterling hesitated. "Your Highness, may I ask a question?"

Celestia nodded with a smile. "Certainly, Sterling Honor."

"Who waits for us below?"

"Oh," replied Celestia. "Sunset Shimmer and a Pegasus guard named Stratosphere. If you have not changed the rank insignia, I do believe he is a corporal."

"But... not the Queen?"

"Queen? That still..." Celestia caught herself and started over. "No... Luna is otherwise engaged. We should see her soon."

Sterling still held his place. After a moment Celestia spoke again. "You are still worried about where your loyalties lie?"

"There will be consequences for all that I have been a part of," replied Sterling. He turned his head to the side to avoid looking at Celestia.

Celestia paused. "Possibly," she replied at last. "I do not know the whole story... I imagine that between Luna and yourself, I will have to make some decisions. But my heart does not want to punish Luna. I did that once already and I regretted it for a thousand years."

Sterling looked back to Celestia as she continued.

"But this is not the time to decide these things. We need to help the others to install the Crystal Heart while we still have a window of

opportunity. So, if you would, Captain, remember your loyalty to Equestria for now and all will sort itself out afterwards."

Sterling raised his head again and stood at attention. "Yes Ma'am," he responded. His voice had regained its professional tone and he nodded.

"Good," replied Celestia with a smile. She opened her wings and knelt down a little. "Now, climb onto my back."

Sterling frowned again. "This is still not proper. I should walk down."

"We don't know if the entry to the shadow realm is still in effect and this is much faster than trying to find your way through that. And if you still aren't certain, then let me remind you: that was an order."

Sterling grimaced and moved at once, approaching Celestia from just behind her wings and awkwardly climbing up, balancing himself across her back and between her wings.

"Hold on," advised Celestia as she stood. She took a couple of running steps towards the opening and leapt out into the air. Her wings exploded outwards as soon as she had cleared the structure and caught the wind effortlessly. She caught her drop and angled into a large upward curve before levelling off and starting to circle.

Sterling's jaw hung open again as he felt the muscles under Celestia's coat and her command of the motion. "So much power..." he whispered. He immediately blushed deeply as Celestia turned her head back to look at him. "I... my apologies, your Majesty."

To his surprise Celestia simply threw her head back and laughed, tilting her body to climb steeply. Sterling held tight as Celestia more than doubled the height of the tower in just a few seconds. She kept going, her wings pumping until they were nearly a thousand feet above the Crystal Empire. Celestia levelled off, and then turned her head back once more to give Sterling a quick wink.

"Hang on," she repeated.

Sterling's eyes widened as Celestia tilted her body and then dove into a steep dive. She angled her wings back and let the wind rush past them until it was a loud roar in their ears. Sterling held his breath tightly, although he wasn't sure that the wind would permit him to breathe even if he tried.

After a few moments of acceleration Celestia spread her wings out a little, smoothly catching the dive and turning the motion into a wide, fast spiral. As they drew closer to the ground she tightened the spiral, at

first keeping the rapid speed for a dizzying spin, but gradually spreading her wings wider to slow. When they were about ten feet from the ground she straightened out, heading back to the Crystal Castle.

Finally, they approached the castle and Celestia angled her body with a couple of final flaps, lowering herself to the ground and gently settling first her hind legs, and then her fore legs. She fell into an easy walking gait as she folded her wings, stopping once they had entered the square underneath the castle. There she turned her head back and grinned at a stunned Sterling.

"Had to break in my new wings," she teased. "Now down you go."

Sterling slipped off Celestia's back and found that he needed to lie down for a moment, at least until the planet stopped spinning. Celestia leaned over and whispered to him teasingly. "That's not even my full power."

"Princess!" Sunset called from the center of the square, where she and Stratosphere were looking at the heart. It was balancing neatly between the two spires of crystal, hovering between them on some invisible force. But that's all that it was doing. Celestia turned to approach it.

"Captain!" called Stratosphere, and he ran over to Sterling. Stratosphere stopped before him and gave a quick salute with his good wing. "Du.. sir! Corporal Stratosphere reporting!" He paused, then tilted his head. "Dude, what happened to you?"

Sterling sighed and pushed himself back to a standing position and then dusted his armor off deftly. He shook his head a couple of times to clear the motion sickness, but as he did the memory of feeling Celestia catch the wind came back to his mind and he smiled.

He coughed to clear his throat and shook his head. "Never mind, Corporal. We will attend to the Princess until we are no longer required."

Stratosphere nodded and saluted a second time, and Sterling Honor returned the salute before the two of them trotted back to the Heart. Sunset was explaining to Celestia.

"When I put it near, it just sort of snapped itself into place. But that's it, nothing else happened. If I give it a little push, it spins a bit..." She reached up to demonstrate. "But that's all that happens. How do we turn it on?"

"Perhaps it just needs to be charged up?" offered Sterling as he trotted near. "I realize we're all a bit low on power, but if we worked together perhaps?"

Celestia smiled, but she shook her head. "It's a good idea," she replied. "But this is one of the ancient artifacts. It will have very specific rules for activation. We would only be wasting power, I fear."

"What about power?" called Luna as she alighted just inside the square. She started walking forward, but stopped abruptly as Celestia turned to face her.

Nopony spoke as the two alicorns looked at each other.

Celestia felt her heart flutter. Seeing Luna in the dream realm had been wonderful, but now that she was awake it did feel like that had just been a dream. Now, Luna was standing before her for real. Younger than she remembered and without Nightmare Moon's dark coat, but still wearing the same armored crest across her breast. Luna's mane hung free of any helmet but without the flowing magic that she once carried. Celestia tried to search Luna's eyes from across the square, but she couldn't make sense of what she saw. They were Luna's eyes and not the terrifying eyes of a dragon, but they still seemed confused.

Luna was confused. Seeing Celestia terrified in the dream realm had been funny enough, at least at first, that Luna was able to approach her with confidence. But now, in reality, it was different. Celestia towered above her. Her mane was flat and pink instead of flowing with the advanced magic that Luna remembered, but Celestia stood tall and confident. Just like she always did. Her eyes... Luna couldn't tell.

*"I can't read her,"* thought Luna. *"Is she anxious? Is she angry?"*

Luna frowned and stomped a hoof in frustration. *"This was supposed to be the easy part! I saved her! Why does she always make that same all-knowing face?"* Luna's horn lit and she tilted her head towards Celestia.

Celestia barely heard the others gasp as her own eyes widened. "Luna...?" she asked.

Luna raised her head again, but her horn was still glowing with charged power. Tears began to ease down over her cheeks as she just stared at Celestia, her jaw tensing more and more.

Celestia's eyes widened further and she raised a hoof, pausing. She placed that hoof back down ahead of herself, and then took another step, and then a third. By the fourth step she was galloping and before Luna had time to do more than gasp in surprise, Celestia's body slammed

into hers. Celestia wrapped her wings around Luna's body and squeezed her tightly against herself.

"No more," whispered Celestia as she kissed Luna's forehead.  
"I'm so sorry, Luna. No more."

## Chapter 40 - Harmony

"Are you ready, Luna?"

Celestia and Luna stood once again underneath the Crystal Castle, lit by the glow of the ever-full moon. Celestia's mane had begun to flow once again as her magic regenerated, although it had not yet regained the pastel stripes that showed her full strength.

Luna, too, stood with more power than a few nights earlier, and her eyes were brighter and more focused. She stood taller and more confident, even though her mane did not display the power of her older sister. Nevertheless, she stood alongside Celestia as the two of them looked towards the lazily-spinning Crystal Heart.

Off to the side, Sunset Shimmer and Sterling Honor stood watching. Sunset glanced to Sterling.

"This should be good," Sunset whispered. "Celestia's going to show some deep magic here while re-charging the heart."

Sterling made a non-committal noise, remaining at attention. "Princess Luna will certainly contribute her fair share," he noted. "But... yes, I must admit that I am interested in where this is going."

"Hopefully it will be enough," commented Sunset, looking back towards the heart. "We've already been here a week, I'm ready to go home. It's way too cold up here."

"Stop complaining," chuckled Sterling. "If nothing else, you get the honor of being a part of history. Isn't that enough?"

They both went quiet immediately and looked towards the sisters when Luna spoke up.

"Sister, wait," she said.

Celestia looked back towards Luna. "What is it, Luna?"

Luna hesitated, turning her head aside. Then she raised it again and met Celestia's eyes with her own. "Before we do this... before we do anything else... I... I have a request."

Celestia looked concerned. "Of course, Luna. Never again be afraid to ask me for anything, please. What is it?"

Luna took a breath. "I have been thinking about it for the last few days. And... I... I want you to raise the sun."

Celestia stopped, studying Luna's expression. "But..." she began slowly. "I... I might not have enough power for both spells. It's only been a few days - if you lower the moon and I raise the sun we might not be able to power up the Heart."

Luna shook her head slowly, looking back up to Celestia. "I don't care," she replied. She raised a hoof and placed it against Celestia's chest. "I was wrong," she whispered. "Before we go back to the Crystal Empire, which was so long ago... may we please fix what went wrong since? If we have to wait a few more days for the Heart... it will be worth it."

Celestia smiled softly. "On one condition, Luna," she said very gently.

Luna looked a little surprised. "A condition? What is it?"

Celestia's smile grew. "We do it together. If this is part of a solution, then I want you to be part of it."

Luna smiled and then nodded. The two of them looked over to Sunset and Sterling.

"Come outside," invited Celestia. "I think you will want to see this."

Luna and Celestia turned and walked back towards the front of the castle, emerging from underneath it and continuing until they stood near the center of the plaza before the staircase. Sunset and Sterling followed, stopping a little further back.

"Have you ever seen Celestia raise the sun?" asked Sterling.

Sunset nodded. "A couple of times, a long time ago. But I've never even heard of them doing it together. It's always been just one doing her part, then the other doing hers."

Sterling looked out towards the Princesses. "I've never seen it. I could never make it to a Summer Sun Celebration, I always had duty somewhere."

Sunset made a sound. "It was always better when it wasn't a Celebration day anyway... Celestia had to put on such a show that it was more about the presentation than the magic. When she was alone, that's when you really got to see the spell's power."

The two of them looked back towards the Princesses again. The Princesses had turned towards the west and Celestia was watching Luna with a smile. Luna's horn began to glow, and then Luna strained noticeably as her gaze went skyward towards the glow of the moon.

Luna's horn brightened, the blue aura increasing in intensity and casting its tint around the plaza. She spread her wings wide and held the power for a moment, shaking a little, before anything more happened.

All at once the moon began to change color, taking on a faint blue outline before a stronger pale blue glow painted itself down across the moon's face. When the entire moon was tinted there was a noticeable flash of blue light, and then Luna released a short pant of breath. Celestia didn't speak, but gently laid a wing across Luna's back.

"I'm okay..." panted Luna. "The hard part is over." She looked up again, and nudged her horn towards the horizon. The moon began to move, imperceptibly at first, but then it began to speed up until it was gliding slowly but steadily towards the horizon. Luna's breathing increased as her magic began to vary in brightness, but she remained focused on her goal.

After just a few more moments, the moon kissed the horizon. Its glow spread across the thin line of distant earth as it slipped beneath. Then there was just a silver-blue sliver of light left, and then the moon was gone, and the sky was dark. Luna released her spell and hunched over, panting deeply.

"Sister...?" began Celestia hesitantly. "What happened? You have not had such difficulty before?"

Luna frowned softly. "I'm... I can't recharge as quickly as you, Celestia." She sighed softly. "I'm not landed here. I don't have my full strength."

"Here?" asked Celestia, looking concerned. "Do you mean the Crystal Empire?"

"Equestria," replied Luna dully. "Equestria has turned away from me."

Celestia's jaw tightened, and for a moment she did not know what to say. "I... we will find a way to fix that, too, sister. I promise."

Luna shook her head. "It doesn't matter anymore," she said. "We have to raise the sun now. Ponies will be wondering what is going on."

Celestia nodded slowly. "Rest, Luna. You need your strength."

Luna smiled. "We had an agreement, Celestia. Please... let me help, if only a little. I'll be okay."

Celestia nodded. "Of course. Are you ready?"

Luna nodded, and the two of them turned towards the east. Celestia draped her wing across Luna's back once again and looked towards the horizon, lighting her horn. Her magic erupted in a brilliant golden aura that reached into the air above her horn. Luna took a breath, and then her horn lit again as well. After a moment, a thin blue strand of magic wove a trail around Celestia's horn, accenting her horn's spiral and merging with the aura above it.

Celestia smiled and nudged her horn skyward, and in the distant east the darkened sky began to turn a lighter shade, slowly beginning to brighten. The horizon went pink, then orange, and then exploded into a bright yellow flame as the top limb of the sun slipped into view. The light from the sun raced across the darkened land and turned the entire Crystal Empire into a gleaming inferno of yellow and orange reflections.

Sunset gasped as she felt those first warm rays heating her coat, and even Sterling couldn't help an utterance of awe. Celestia looked down at Luna with a question in her eyes, and Luna smiled back. "Go ahead," Luna whispered.

Celestia lowered her head to nuzzle Luna affectionately before she looked back to the sun, again nudging her horn towards the sky. The sun obeyed her movement and began to climb. As it rose the landscape around them brightened, and the deep black of the eternal night began to give way to the pale blue sky. Celestia held the spell as the sun climbed, checking on Luna occasionally. For her part, Luna continued to feed enough magic into Celestia's spell to keep a trace of blue magic spiralling up Celestia's horn, but she didn't seem to be struggling to do so.

"Amazing..." whispered Sterling.

"Yes," replied Sunset. "I thought I'd never see it again..."

"It's beautiful," whispered Luna as the sun settled into its position in the sky.

All at once a ring of magic blasted into their backs. A broad arc sprayed across the earth and spread out towards the distant horizon. All four of them raced around to look into the square underneath the castle. The sunlight had reached through the castle and was illuminating the Crystal Heart, now spinning rapidly and casting fractured spectrums of light in all directions.

"The heart!" cried Sunset. "What's it doing?"

There was a soft chuckle from behind one of the castle's pillars, and then a dark shadow stepped out into the sunlight. The sharp contrast from the newly bright light of day made it difficult to see at first, but the

dark shadow resolved itself into the form of a large grey wolf as their eyes adjusted.

"The bond is restored," said Ulfrid. "And the heart spreads that love across the land."

Sunset's jaw dropped as Celestia and Sterling merely stared, but Luna leapt at the wolf and wrapped her wings tight around him. "Ulfrid!" she shouted. "Ulfrid, I thought you were destroyed!"

Ulfrid smiled at the embrace and shook his head. "I apologize, my liege. I could not approach whilst the leylines were so damaged."

"Do you mean the bonds you mentioned?" asked Luna. She released her hold on the wolf and stepped back, tilting her head. "Did the heart fix them?"

Ulfrid chuckled. "Nay, Highness. The heart has begun to repair the damage to the leylines, but first the two of you had to repair the bond."

Celestia stepped forward again. "I am glad to see you are all right, Ulfrid."

Ulfrid bowed to Celestia. "As I am for you, Highness. Congratulations on your success."

Sunset came forward and smiled. "All right then," she began with a grin. "So who *are* you?"

Ulfrid smiled and bowed to Sunset. "I serve," he replied.

"Some things never change, do they?" asked Sunset. Ulfrid grinned toothily in response.

"They told me that you were dead, wolf," began Sterling. "But I have to admit that I'm glad to see it's not so."

Ulfrid smiled and dipped his head to Sterling. "You have always stood by your loyalty, Captain. I trust that will be easier now."

"How...?" asked Sterling, but again Ulfrid only smiled.

Luna interrupted. "But if you were not destroyed, then what happened to you?"

Ulfrid bowed low. "I apologize, my Liege. I approached closer to the damaged land than I should have, and I could not hold on. I retreated back and did my best to send competent assistance in my stead." He smiled back to Sterling.

"Wait," replied Sterling. "So you DID do something?"

Ulfrid smiled. "I only presented opportunity, Captain."

"So... if the heart is fixing things," interjected Sunset. "How do we get the Crystal Ponies back?"

Ulfrid smiled towards her. "Once the leylines are completely repaired, the barrier that hides them will be very thin. You will be able to lead them out then. You have done very well."

Luna sighed softly. "I suppose it stands to reason that all that was needed was to return the sun. It was always the greater power, wasn't it?"

"Nay, my Liege." Ulfrid shook his head. "It was not the return of the sun, but your decision to reconcile. The sun returns by your choice, but it took both of you to recover the power of the Crystal Heart."

"And you know all this because...?" pressed Sunset. Ulfrid merely grinned at her.

"I know, I know... you serve," she grumbled. "Just once I'd like a straight answer."

"Peace, Sunset Shimmer," advised Celestia with a chuckle. "It would seem that we can at last return home."

"One more thing," commented Ulfrid, and he nodded towards Luna.

Luna gasped, rooting her hooves against the ground with a sudden awareness. Her eyes widened as a smile spread across her face. "Celestia!" she cried out. A tear raced down her face but her expression was one of glee. "I'm landed!"

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The Canterlot throne room was notably brighter in the light of day. The dais had been extended to support a second throne of gold next to Luna's obsidian, and Celestia sat on it next to Luna on hers. Between the two of them stood Sunset Shimmer, while Sterling Honor stood at attention on the second step, facing the distant doorway.

Both Celestia and Luna had had time to restore to their full power. Celestia's mane flowed in the invisible breeze, the pastel stripes of her magic carrying along her mane, while her tail flowed the same behind her throne. Luna's mane flowed on the invisible currents of her night breeze, the stars of the night sky reflected in them -- her own eternal night carried with her always.

"This will be our last court together for a while," commented Celestia. "Are you sure that you're going to be okay, Luna?"

Luna smiled and nodded. "I told you, Celestia, I'm fine. It has been long enough that I should be able to release the Crystal Ponies, and they will need somepony to help them readjust after being away for so long. I do have some experience, after all." She grinned.

Celestia nodded. "I know," she said slowly. "But you'll write regularly?"

Luna smiled. "Of course, dear sister."

"Besides," interjected Sunset. "You'll have me to keep you company, Princess Celestia."

Luna smirked at Celestia as Celestia looked back to Sunset. "Actually," she began with a teasing glint in her eye. "I think it's time that you got back to work."

Sunset blinked in surprise. "Work? We're starting up my studies again?"

Celestia chuckled. "In a way. Luna and I have a task for you..."

Sunset looked genuinely interested. "Oh? What is it?"

Luna smirked and replied. "Well, it's about the Elements of Harmony that you lost..."

"Wait... what?" asked Sunset.

Celestia nodded. "We agreed that it's not good to have them lost in the world. Even if we are not sure if we can activate them, we need you to bring them back. I do recall you saying that you knew where to start..."

Sunset looked a little less happy about the assignment. "It could take months to find them all," she protested. "And I'd have to travel all over Equestria!"

"Seems to me that you've done that before," chuckled Sterling without breaking his formal stance.

Celestia chuckled softly. "Yes, indeed. But I think that it would be very good for you, as well as being very important. Of course, you will have the full support of Canterlot for travel arrangements and budget." She leaned in close and mock-whispered, teasingly. "That means *buying* the Element in the used goods store, not *acquiring* it."

Sunset frowned. "I didn't think I'd be out on my own again so soon," she sulked.

Celestia leaned closer still and nuzzled Sunset gently. "Don't think of it that way," she advised. "You can return to Canterlot to visit and

report to us any time you feel the need. And besides," she grinned. "You will have Sterling Honor along with you for official support."

Sunset blinked. "Wait! What?"

Sterling turned to face her, grinning. "After all," he noted. "You do have a history as a dangerous fugitive. Somepony needs to keep an eye on you. I hope you're ready to *run* a lot."

Luna laughed softly. "Now, now, Sterling Honor. Do not tease our student."

Sterling smiled and nodded, bowing. "Yes, your Majesty." He smiled back to Sunset. "More seriously, it is a part of my repayment to Equestria. I will be at your disposal for support and, if necessary protection, for the duration of your mission. Sergeant Impulse will run the guard in my absence."

"Wow," mused Sunset. "Um... all right, Princesses. We can do that."

Celestia and Luna nodded as Sterling turned forward again. Luna looked around. "Where is Ulfrid?" she wondered aloud. "We are past due to begin court."

"But one petitioner this morning, my Liege," came a voice from the end of the long hall. All four ponies looked up to see Ulfrid ambling down the carpet towards them.

"You made it!" teased Luna. "Show them in, please, Ulfrid."

Ulfrid reached the base of the thrones and bowed low. "Nay, my Liege, for the petitioner this morning is thine humble beast."

"You, Ulfrid?" asked Celestia. "What would you ask of us?"

Ulfrid raised from his bow and smiled a crooked smile. "I am here to report that Equestria is quiet and stable. While some pockets of resentment remain, peace prevails, and I can only assume that the reintegration of the crystal ponies will be good for all."

Luna smiled softly. "I will certainly do my best," she promised.

Ulfrid smiled back and dipped his head. "As I know that you will. And that is why I am here today to tell you that my work is complete, and that it is time for me to leave."

Luna and Celestia both frowned, and Luna got to her hooves. She stepped off the dais and stood directly in front of Ulfrid. "Leave?" she asked. "Leave for where?"

Ulfrid bowed and smiled. "You do not require my services any longer, my Liege."

"Whether I need them or not," retorted Luna. "I *desire* them!"

"My purpose was merely guidance whilst your path was uncertain. You are no longer lost, Your Highness. You require a steward no longer."

Luna blinked and raised a hoof to touch Ulfrid's cheek. "Titles don't matter, none of that matters. You're my *friend*."

The others watched quietly while Ulfrid bowed again. "Should you ever need me, Your Highness, I will always be around the nearest corner."

Luna looked down at him quietly. "I can't stop you, can I?"

Ulfrid remained in his bow. "No, my Liege. But I would prefer your leave."

Luna sighed deeply, and she looked at Celestia. Celestia nodded slowly, and then Luna looked back down to Ulfrid. She blinked away a few tears and smiled crookedly at the wolf. "We wouldn't have made it without you, Ulfrid."

Ulfrid didn't rise. "I always had confidence in you, my Liege. Now, if you could...?"

Luna nodded, slowly. "You are excused, dear Ulfrid. Don't stay away too long."

Ulfrid smiled in his bow. "I will always be near, dear Princess." He stood again and looked to Celestia. "By your leave, Princess?"

Celestia smiled softly and nodded. "Safe travels to you, Ulfrid."

Ulfrid closed his eyes and dipped his head, smiling anew. Then he turned and ambled back down the long carpet towards the distant door. The ponies watched him go until he turned through the open doorway, and then Luna turned and stepped back onto the dais. She mounted her throne with a heavy sigh.

"Are you alright, Luna?" asked Celestia.

Luna nodded softly. "A little sad, dear sister. But I suppose that part of me expected that this day would come. He was always a little more than he seemed."

Celestia nodded to Luna, smiling softly. "Haven't you figured it out yet?"

Luna managed a bit of a smirk. "Hm. Only some, I think."

Sunset frowned, and interjected. "Well, I don't understand any of it! What are you talking about?"

Luna smiled to Sunset and then looked to Celestia for confirmation. "Ulfrid is bonded to Equestria, isn't he? That's why we lost him when you broke the leylines of the Frozen North?"

Celestia hummed and nodded. "I think that he *is* Equestria. When your covenant with the land was broken, he was manifested to guide you back. That's why he wanted us *both* to succeed."

Luna considered that, nodding slowly. "That explains a lot. It explains how he moved around, and why he could never directly tell us what we needed to do."

Sunset brightened. "Oh! Like a golem? He couldn't make decisions without a living master?"

Celestia chuckled. "A crude analogy, I think, but maybe close enough. He clearly had a preference, but perhaps was not able or not permitted to manifest it."

Luna nodded again. "Much more than a golem, certainly." She considered for a moment. "So the disruption of the magical fields interfered with his manifestation... but he was still able to impart influence a little further away - for instance: to send the Captain as support in his place."

Sterling sighed softly, though he still held his stance. "I may have misjudged his intent."

Celestia shook her head. "But do you see, little sister? Equestria *herself* wants us both. What an honor - we were *meant* to rule together. I promise you... I will never let myself forget that again."

Luna smiled softly, her eyes misty. "I don't even want to rule without you, sister."

Sunset smiled softly, her own eyes growing misty, but Sterling stomped his hoof and coughed loudly. "Ahem, not to interrupt, Highnesses! I hearby declare today's court officially closed. Sunset Shimmer, we have some packing to do!"

Celestia blinked, and then laughed aloud. "All right, Sterling Honor. Everypony is dismissed!"

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Sterling Honor looked around his office one last time. Everything had been packed away, all his paperwork had been passed on to Sergeant Impulse, and everything remaining had been locked away. There was just one task left before he could head home and prepare for his journey.

There was a faint knock at the door behind him, and he turned around, using his magic to swing the door open.

"Come in, Corporal," he called.

Stratosphere entered the office. His wing was still bandaged but Sterling had been told it was healing well enough. There was even a chance that Stratosphere would fly again, although never to the heights that he used to. And this was what Sterling wanted to address.

Stratosphere raised his good wing to his forehead in a salute, and stood at attention. "Corporal Stratosphere reporting," he said softly. "Though I don't think it matters, sir."

"You're still in the guard, pony," noted Sterling. "So there will be none of that talk."

"You should have just let me quit, dude..."

Sterling assumed a stern expression. He knew that Stratosphere was unhappy, but he hoped that this would offer some reward for the pegasus' help. "Corporal, I have something new for you to work on."

Stratosphere sighed and looked aside, towards the window. "Come on, dude. My wing's busted up. I'm no good for anything anymore. Sir."

Sterling forced a chuckle, and tapped a hoof on the ground to get Stratosphere to look forward again. "I'd hate to lose those eyes of yours," he noted. "You've been very important."

"They aren't any good to me down on the ground," complained Stratosphere. He did at least turn his head and look forward.

"Well, maybe you don't have to stay on the ground," encouraged Sterling.

"I'm sorry du.. sir. I just can't handle balloon flight. It's just too slow."

Sterling chuckled, that was the hook he had been waiting for. "That's just it," he replied. "I want you to go investigate this development in the Griffin Kingdom - a place called Kitten Hawk. It's a new invention called an aeroplane..."

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Sunset Shimmer opened the flap on her saddlebag and used her magic to lift her diary from within it. Setting the book down on her bed, she flipped idly through the pages, pausing every so often to read an entry. She started as she was interrupted by a voice from behind her.

"Are you packed for your journey, Sunset Shimmer?" asked Celestia.

Sunset turned and looked up at Princess Celestia with a confused expression. Celestia smiled gently back to her.

"Are you just... sending me away, Princess?"

Celestia shook her head and opened her wings, reaching forward and drawing Sunset up against her breast. "No, dear one. No. The Elements of Harmony are very important, and you are the only pony who even knows where to start looking for them. But there is another, *more* important reason."

Sunset looked up at her, and Celestia smiled back down to Sunset. "I have been negligent in your development," continued Celestia. "I've been too afraid to send you off on the challenges that I've known you were more than ready for, because I didn't want to let you go."

"Why?" asked Sunset.

"You are not just a student, Sunset Shimmer... I care for you as much as my own daughter. And that means that sometimes I have made decisions that were more for my benefit than yours. But I see that now, and I know that you are not only ready to meet these challenges, but that you need these challenges to grow." She grinned. "Consider it a test."

"But Princess," asked Sunset. "What if I fail?"

"Is that the right question?" asked Celestia. When Sunset only looked confused, Celestia shifted to hold Sunset before her, lowering her head to Sunset's level. She looked directly into Sunset's eyes and spoke with all seriousness. "What if you *succeed*?"

Sunset's eyes widened with realization, and she nodded. Celestia smiled and raised her head again. "Don't be afraid, Sunset. I will always be here to guide you and you will always be able to ask me for help. But I know that you are ready for the next level of your studies and that great things are coming."

Sunset considered that, her eyes going to the ground as she thought about it. When her eyes came up again, they were clear. "I can do this, Princess."

Celestia smiled and nodded. "And all Equestria is ready to see that."